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# THE NEW YORKER



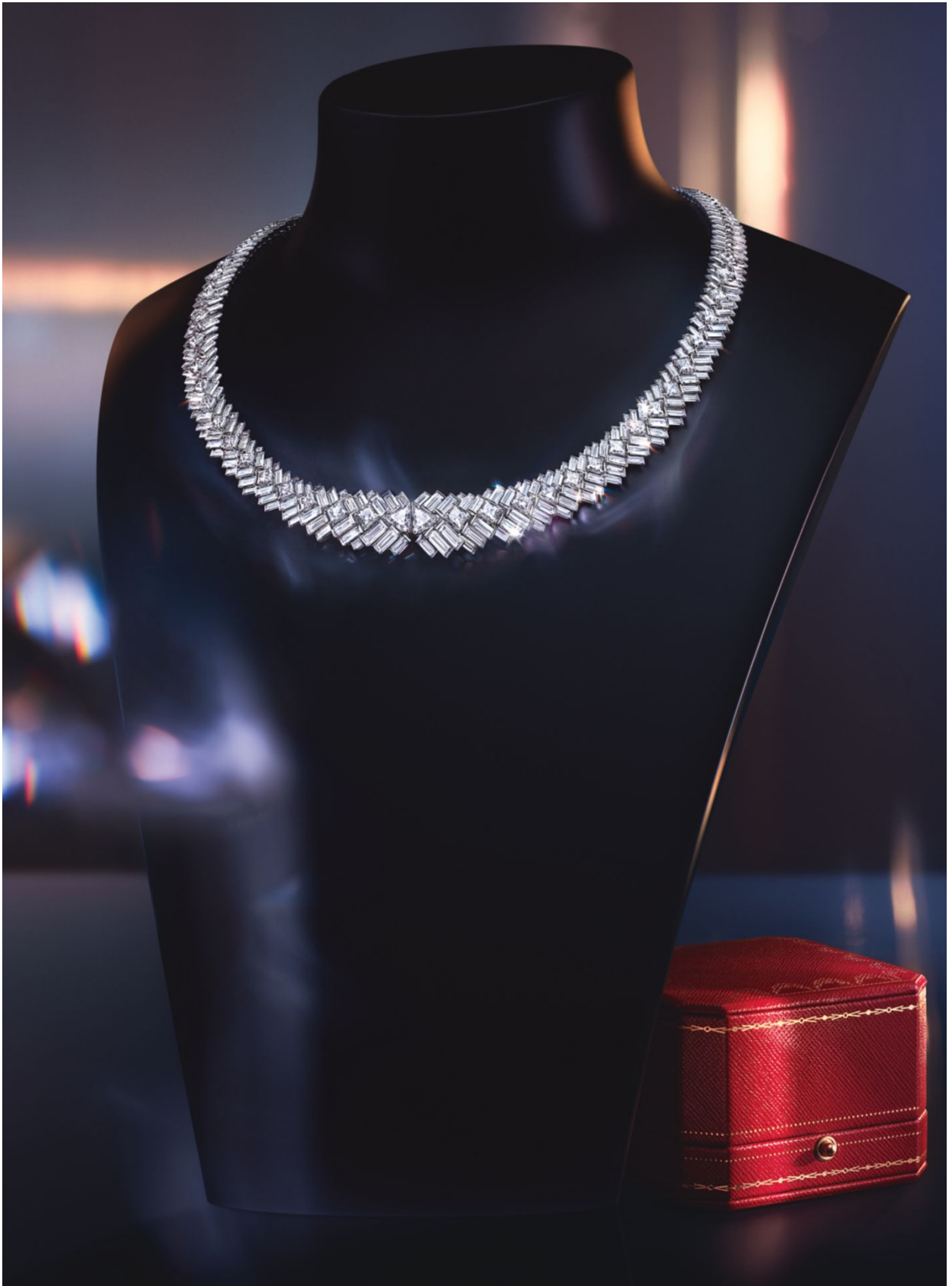


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# THE NEW YORKER

MARCH 5, 2018

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#### PODCAST

Adam Davidson discusses how the Trump family's business dealings abroad could inform the Mueller investigation.



#### PHOTO BOOTH

Charlie LeDuff on Zackary Canepari's portrait of the Flint, Michigan, police department in crisis.

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# THE MAIL

## DEATH AND THE MIND

Rachel Aviv beautifully illuminates the story of Jahi McMath, a child who was declared brain-dead four years ago, in Oakland, and the family members who disagree with her diagnosis (“The Death Debate,” February 5th). They deserve Aviv’s advocacy. However, Aviv also seems to create villains in her telling. Her writing subtly but powerfully forms a picture of an uncaring hospital and incompetent, indifferent, and possibly racist health-care providers. I know the hospital and the people whom Aviv describes; I completed some of my medical training there about a decade ago, though I have never reviewed any medical records associated with the McMath case, nor have I directly spoken about the case with any of the providers involved. For more than a hundred years, the Children’s Hospital has delivered compassionate care to the children of Oakland, despite ever-shrinking funding. Aviv gives full voice to the fear, distrust, and helplessness that the family has felt—a voice that likely resonates with many readers. But she gives no such space to the feelings of the others caught up in this difficult situation. Tragedy does not require villainy.

*Peter Oishi, M.D.*

*Medical Director, PICU*

*University of California San Francisco  
Benioff Children’s Hospital  
Oakland, Calif.*

As I approach the end of my ninetieth year on this earth, I have been thinking about death more frequently. I am in no hurry to move on to “the undiscover’d country from whose bourn no traveller returns,” as Hamlet says. But I had decided, and written in my will, that, if my mind goes before my body, then my body should be allowed to die. I will not be in it. Then came Aviv’s poignant exposition on what constitutes death, and I’m left wondering what criteria my family should use, when the time comes, to determine whether my mind is gone. If all I can do is wiggle a

finger in response to a prompt, I think that they should pull the plug. And yet it’s one thing to make such a call for me, near the end of my natural life span; it’s entirely another for Jahi, who, even now, is only seventeen. As Aviv makes abundantly clear, there is a whole spectrum of measurements and behaviors of the brain that cannot be codified into exact legal bases for action. Ultimately, in my case, the decision will fall to my wife; for Jahi, the decision will be her loving mother’s. It may not be entirely rational, but it doesn’t need to be.

*Robert M. Fitch*

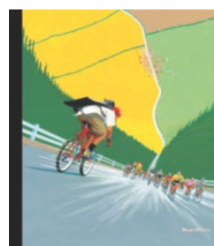
*El Prado, N.M.*

As a nurse in a pediatric intensive-care unit, I face morally distressing situations on an unfortunately frequent basis. Brain death is one of the most difficult concepts that families and health-care providers deal with in medicine, suspending everyone involved in an agonizing purgatory. However, as medical management and technology improve, we must continue to consider the ethics of certain decisions, including those made by parents and by physicians. Many of my colleagues regularly discuss whether the fact that we *can* do something necessarily means that we always *should* do it, and the complexity of this issue contributes to the high burnout and turnover rates of PICU nurses. On a daily basis, I ask myself these questions: What is life? What does it mean to truly be alive? What does it mean to live as a child? I am not talking about arterial flow or atrophy of a brain stem, but about the experience of being a child. I don’t know the answers, but I have seen that, in situations like Jahi’s, the child can sometimes get lost amid disagreeing adults.

*Rayna Eisenhut Coccari*

*Seattle, Wash.*

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FEBRUARY 28 – MARCH 6, 2018

# GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



COLLAGE BY DAVID BOWIE USING FILM STILLS FROM "THE MAN WHO FELL TO EARTH," 1975-76  
COURTESY OF THE DAVID BOWIE ARCHIVE, STUDIOCANAL, AND THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

In 1976, David Bowie chose an unorthodox opening act for his "Thin White Duke" tour—the Surrealist film "Un Chien Andalou," by Luis Buñuel and Salvador Dalí. The same year, Bowie cast an uncanny eye on himself in this photo-collage, made using production stills from the movie "The Man Who Fell to Earth." It's one of the four hundred items from his personal archive—costumes, handwritten lyrics, album art, videos—in **"David Bowie Is,"** opening March 2 at the Brooklyn Museum.



# CLASSICAL MUSIC



The flutist Claire Chase performs Marcos Balter's riotous work "PAN" at the Kitchen this week.

## Pandemonium

*A dynamic flutist makes a career out of creating community.*

In the past decade, the flutist Claire Chase has become one of the prime movers in the music of our time. Technically brilliant, audacious in her approach to programming and presentation, cyclonic in her energy, she proves that difficult music can give delight. She initially won wide notice as the first-among-equals leader of the International Contemporary Ensemble, which has arguably become America's leading modern-music group. A couple of years ago, she stepped away from running ICE, although she remains part of the ensemble. In collaboration with Steven Schick, another modernist dynamo, she is overseeing summer music programs at the Banff Centre, in Alberta, Canada; she also joined the music faculty at Harvard last fall. Within a week of taking up her Harvard post, she was arrested during a street protest in support of the DACA program.

In 2013, Chase launched a project called "Density 2036," named for Edgard Varèse's classic solo-flute work "Density 21.5." Each year until 2036, the centennial of "Density," Chase will commission and perform a program of new flute scores. The latest addition to the catalogue is Marcos Balter's "PAN," a ninety-minute conceptual piece that has been emerging in parts for the past couple of years and

will receive its first full performance at the Kitchen (March 2-3). Balter is a forty-three-year-old Brazilian-American whose blend of complexity and vitality exemplifies musical discourse in the Chase-ICE cosmos. "PAN" is an ambivalent paean to the Greek goat god, depicting his capacities for creation and destruction. Chase not only plays but sings, speaks, and acts; the work feels like an extension of her torrential spirit.

Yet "PAN" is more than a virtuoso vehicle. After an opening section in which Chase thrashingly evokes Pan's death, an ensemble of nonprofessional participants joins the performance to deliver a lament for him and to partake of his spirit. The lay performers are asked to elicit sounds from tuned wineglasses, ocarinas, triangles, bamboo chimes, and other handheld instruments. They also hum or whistle given tones. At one point, according to Balter's score, they are invited to "improvise in hyper-active and extremely loud fashion." (An instructional session gives guidance beforehand.) Jennifer Judge, a musicologist who has been following the development of the project, writes, "The genesis of 'PAN' amounts to the creation not just of a work of art, but of a community." Having participated in a performance of a portion of the piece, I can attest that the experience is peculiarly exhilarating. The cult of the godlike artist gives way to a collective ceremony—art as grassroots action.

—Alex Ross

## Metropolitan Opera

In John Copley's monumental production of Rossini's rarely performed "**Semiramide**," a bass, a tenor, and a mezzo-soprano (in a trouser role) compete in a three-way race for the ingénue's heart and the throne of the ancient Assyrian empire. It's a transparent setup for a game of one-upmanship, and what follows is a string of arias and ensembles in which a supremely talented cast of bel-canto singers—Ildar Abdrazakov, Javier Camarena, and Elizabeth DeShong—compete in feats of vocal derring-do. As Semiramide, the ostensible queen of the proceedings, the American soprano Angela Meade falters a bit, delivering a lot of power but little finesse; the orchestra, conducted by Maurizio Benini, sounds rusty in the expansive and relentlessly propulsive style of late Rossini. *Feb. 28 and March 6 at 7:30 and March 3 at 8.* • The Met has just announced that the conductor Yannick Nézet-Séguin will begin his tenure as music director this fall, two years ahead of schedule. Fresh off of his success leading the company in an enthralling rendition of Wagner's "**Parsifal**," the dynamic Canadian maestro next tackles an opera almost as forbidding: Richard Strauss's "**Elektra**." Patrice Chéreau's acclaimed production of the hair-raising work stars the American dramatic soprano Christine Goerke, who caused a sensation in the title role at Carnegie Hall three years ago. The cast also includes Elza van den Heever, Michaela Schuster, Jay Hunter Morris, and Mikhail Petrenko. *March 1 at 8 and March 5 at 7:30.* • Met audiences never have to wait long for Franco Zeffirelli's crowd-pleasing production of "**La Bohème**" to reappear on the company's schedule. The latest revival has an excellent cast headed by Sonya Yoncheva (late of the Met's new "**Tosca**"), Michael Fabiano, Susanna Phillips, and Lucas Meacham; Marco Armiliato, the Met's trusted Italian hand, is on the podium. *March 2 at 8.* • An early high point of Peter Gelb's tenure, Anthony Minghella's vividly cinematic staging of "**Madama Butterfly**" still feels clean, fresh, and vital more than a decade later. The revival stars Ermonela Jaho, Roberto Aronica, Maria Zifchak, and Roberto Frontali; Armiliato. *March 3 at 1.* (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

## American Symphony Orchestra: "Intolleranza 1960"

Leon Botstein's final concert of the season with his orchestra is not only one of the modern-music events of the year but also a highly relevant political gesture. Luigi Nono, one of the musical masters of postwar Italy, strove to banish the ghosts of Fascism in this opera ("**Intolerance**"), which, in an uncompromising but powerful modernist style, relays the story of a migrant worker who is jailed and tortured for participating in a political protest. The slate of vocal soloists for the opera, presented in concert form, includes the noted Daniel Weeks and Hai-Ting Chinn. *March 1 at 8.* (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)

## ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

### New York Philharmonic

Jaap van Zweden doesn't fully take the reins as music director until this fall, but with his first season announced—and with last month's superb performance of Act I of "**Die Walküre**" under his belt—he's clearly in take-charge mode. His next program is with a charismatic soloist, Yuja Wang, who will get a chance to display some depth in



Brahms's tender but burly First Piano Concerto; van Zweden completes the concerts with a thrilling, if rather odd, pairing, Prokofiev's crackling Symphony No. 5 in B-Flat Major. *Feb. 28 and March 1 at 7:30 and March 2-3 at 8. (David Geffen Hall. 212-875-5656.)*

## RECITALS

### Met Live Arts

The Metropolitan Museum offers two kinds of music this week: early and much, much earlier. First, the British quartet Red Priest explores connections between the Baroque composers Biber, Telemann, Handel, and Vivaldi and so-called Gypsy musicians, at the museum's Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium. Then, up at the Cloisters, the spellbinding singer, harpist, and storyteller Benjamin Bagby performs medieval songs about travel. *Feb. 28 at 7; March 4 at 3. (212-570-3949.)*

### Piotr Beczala

The tenor, an elegant and powerful artist and a Met hero, teams up with Martin Katz to offer a program divided between Italian songs and arias and songs by such Polish masters as Szymanowski (Six Songs, Op. 2), Moniuszko, and Karłowicz. *Feb. 28 at 8. (Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800.)*

### Simon Keenlyside

The British baritone possesses a ruggedly handsome voice and the kind of lively musical intellect that can unite a diverse program of songs. His recital for Lincoln Center's "Great Performers" series weaves together material from Sibelius, Schubert, Fauré, and a variety of twentieth-century English-language composers; Malcolm Martineau plays piano. *March 1 at 7:30. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500.)*

### Daniil Trifonov and Sergei Babayan

Trifonov, a benchmark Russian virtuoso who is also a sensitive and generous artist, joins Babayan, a valued mentor, in an evening of classic works for two pianos by Schumann, Mozart (the Sonata for Two Pianos in D Major, K. 448), and Rachmaninoff, along with a novelty by Arvo Pärt ("Pari Intervall"). *March 1 at 7:30. (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800.)*

### Ecstatic Music Festival

Even for a festival that specializes in audacious combinations and post-genre hybrids, this program is striking: Arone Dyer, a sparky vocalist and multi-instrumentalist best known for her work in the art-pop duo Buke and Gase, convenes her ad-hoc singing ensemble, Dronechoir, for a socially conscious collaboration with the poets Mahogany L. Browne, Imani Davis, and Ramya Ramana. *March 1 at 7:30. (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330.)*

### Miller Theatre

The International Contemporary Ensemble assembles for a "Composer Portrait," focussing on Ann Cleare, an Irish composer whose interest in static and sculptural aspects of sound prompts elegant constructions that are rich in timbral, textural, and formal complexity. In sharp contrast, Yarn/Wire, a superb quartet of pianists and percussionists, devotes a casual "pop-up" concert to Catherine Lamb's "Curvo Totalitas," a sensual exercise in sustained tone and shifting perception, presented in a newly extended version. *March 1 at 8; March 6 at 6. (Columbia University, Broadway at 116th St. millertheatre.com.)*

### National Sawdust: "Spring Revolution"

The Williamsburg new-music hub mounts an annual series to advance the anarchic spirit of creativity that Stravinsky unleashed back in 1913. This year's festival celebrates the achievements of a multicultural roster of women; among the first events is a day of music curated by the Australian-born opera singer Xenia Hanusiak, which features an appearance by the singer-songwriter Emily Wurramara and a concert of music given by the recorder player Genevieve Lacey (performing pieces by Nico Muhly, John Rodgers, and others). *March 3 at 7 and 10. (80 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. nationalsawdust.org.)*

### Inon Barnatan

The young Israeli pianist, a much admired member of New York's musical community, comes to the 92nd Street Y to offer a concert dedicated to the genre of "musical moments," with a recent work by Avner Dorman nestled among classics by Schubert (the beloved "Moments Musicaux," D. 780) and Rachmaninoff. *March 3 at 8. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500.)*

### Anne-Sophie Mutter

The commanding violinist returns to Carnegie Hall with some favorite collaborators: the pianist Lambert Orkis, as well as the composers André Previn (with the world premiere of "The Fifth Season") and Krzysztof Penderecki, whose works share the program with music by Bach (the Partita No. 2 in D Minor) and Brahms. *March 4 at 2. (212-247-7800.)*

### Peoples' Symphony Concerts:

#### Lise de la Salle

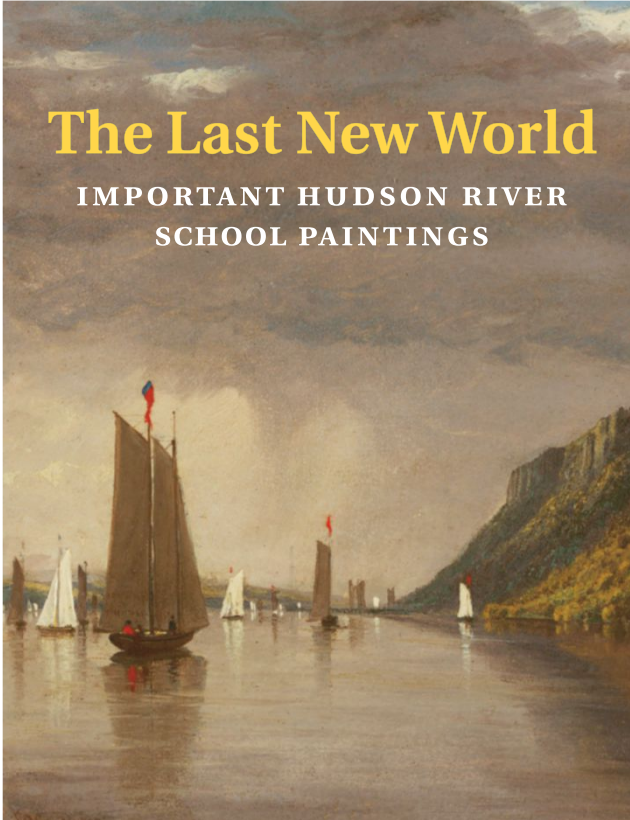
A week replete with keyboard virtuosos is further enlivened with an appearance by this fascinating young French artist, who takes to the Town Hall to offer a tribute to J. S. Bach that begins with that composer's "Italian Concerto" and continues with works by Roussel, Liszt, and Poulenc, as well as Bach arrangements by Liszt, Busoni, and Wilhelm Kempff. *March 4 at 2. (123 W. 43rd St. pscny.org.)*

### Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center: "The Roaring Twenties"

A clutch of the Society's younger virtuosos—including the Schumann Quartet, which features three brothers of that name—perform works from everyone's favorite decade, including pieces both profound (Janáček's String Quartet No. 2, "Intimate Letters") and glamorously entertaining (a two-piano arrangement of Gershwin's "An American in Paris" and Korngold's Suite for Piano Left Hand, Two Violins, and Cello). *March 4 at 5. (Alice Tully Hall. 212-875-5788.)*

### So Percussion / JACK Quartet

Two new-music ensembles of high virtuosity meet up at Zankel Hall for an all-première concert. The U.S. debut of Philip Glass's String Quartet No. 8—Glass is a master of the form—is enough of an attraction in itself, but new pieces by Donnacha Dennehy ("Broken Unison") and Dan Trueman ("Songs That Are Hard to Sing") are also on offer. *March 6 at 7. (212-247-7800.)*



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*The Palisades, New York, 1854, detail*

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# THE THEATRE

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## OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

### Admissions

In this new play by Joshua Harmon ("Significant Other"), Jessica Hecht is an admissions director at a private academy who is diversifying the student body while her own son applies to Ivy League colleges. Daniel Aukin directs. (*Mitzi E. Newhouse*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

### Amy and the Orphans

In Lindsey Ferrentino's play, produced by the Roundabout, two siblings take their sister (Jamie Brewer), who has Down syndrome, on a road trip after their father's death. (*Laura Pels*, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300. In previews. Opens March 1.)

### Angels in America

Andrew Garfield, Nathan Lane, and Lee Pace star in the National Theatre's revival of Tony Kushner's epic two-part drama about New Yorkers living through the nineteen-eighties AIDS epidemic. Directed by Marianne Elliott. (*Neil Simon*, 250 W. 52nd St. 877-250-2929. In previews.)

### Carousel

Jack O'Brien directs a revival of the classic Rodgers and Hammerstein musical, starring Joshua Henry, Jessie Mueller, and Renée Fleming. (*Imperial*, 249 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

### Escape to Margaritaville

The songs of Jimmy Buffett, from "Come Monday" to "Cheeseburger in Paradise," are the basis of this new jukebox musical, directed by Christopher Ashley. (*Marquis*, Broadway at 46th St. 877-250-2929. In previews.)

### Frozen

Disney brings its hit film to the stage, with songs by Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez. Caissie Levy and Patti Murin play the sisters Elsa and Anna in Michael Grandage's production. (*St. James*, 246 W. 44th St. 866-870-2717. In previews.)

### Good for Otto

Ed Harris, Rhea Perlman, and F. Murray Abraham star in David Rabe's play, directed by Scott Elliott for the New Group and set in an overburdened mental-health center in Connecticut. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200. In previews.)

### Lobby Hero

Second Stage reopens its new Broadway home with Trip Cullman's revival of Kenneth Lonergan's 2001 play about a murder investigation in a Manhattan apartment building, starring Michael Cera and Chris Evans. (*Helen Hayes*, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. Previews begin March 1.)

### queens

Martyna Majok's play is set in a basement apartment in Queens, where two generations of immigrant women clash; Danya Taymor directs the LCT3 production. (*Claire Tow*, 150 W. 65th St. 212-239-6200. In previews. Opens March 5.)

### Three Small Irish Masterpieces

Charlotte Moore directs a triptych of one-acts: William Butler Yeats's "The Pot of Broth" (1905),

Lady Gregory's "The Rising of the Moon" (1907), and John Millington Synge's "Riders to the Sea" (1904). (*Irish Repertory*, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737. Previews begin March 2.)

### Three Tall Women

Glenda Jackson, Laurie Metcalf, and Alison Pill play the same woman at different ages in Edward Albee's play, which won the 1994 Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Joe Mantello directs. (*Golden*, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

### Three Wise Guys

The Actors Company Theatre ends its final season with Scott Alan Evans and Jeffrey Couchman's comedy, based on two stories by Damon Runyon and set in a speakeasy on Christmas Eve, 1932. (*Beckett*, 410 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. In previews.)

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## NOW PLAYING

### Edward Albee's At Home at the Zoo: Homelife & The Zoo Story

Don't talk to strangers. Or to intimates. Or to anyone at all. In Albee's paired one-acts, Peter (Robert Sean Leonard), a fogyish publisher of boring, important textbooks, is enticed into two painful conversations, first with Ann (Katie Finneran), his wife, then with Jerry (Paul Sparks), a man he meets at the park. Ann, who longs for more excitement in their marriage, wants to know if she and Peter can "become animals." Jerry tells Peter, "You're an animal, too." Of course, it's human self-consciousness—the thing that separates us from animals—and the impossibility of overcoming it that give these plays their humor and sorrow and horror. Andrew Lieberman's set—a few pieces of furniture splayed against the stage's wide expanse—skews abstract, but Lila Neugebauer's sensitively directed and finely acted production grounds the work in everyday behavior and real feeling. (*Pershing Square Signature Center*, 480 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529.)

### Hangmen

Martin McDonagh's latest comedic drama illustrates how the slick, self-satisfied cynicism that infects his weakest scripts threatens to overtake his real gifts. It begins promisingly, in a prison cell in the North of England. Harry (Mark Addy), the hangman, has a job to do, and he wears his hideous responsibility like a badge he can't help shining. A couple of years later, Harry's at a pub pulling pints, along with his wife, Alice (Sally Rogers). Hanging has been abolished, and Harry longs for the authority that comes with established order, while Mooney (the very attractive Johnny Flynn), a newcomer to the pub, represents something like disorder, an alluring controlled chaos, the cool turbulence of the dandy. The characters engage in all sorts of brutal and morally misguided high jinks, fuelled by McDonagh's technical skill and his jadedness. But the excitement that he elicits is hollow. (Reviewed in our issue of 2/26/18.) (*Atlantic Theatre Company*, 336 W. 20th St. 866-811-4111.)

### Hello, Dolly!

Jerry Zaks's blockbuster revival has a new Dolly, the fascinating and sui-generis star Bernadette Peters. The thrill of watching her predecessor, Bette Midler, was in seeing a performer slip into

a role she was incontestably born to play. Peters is a less obvious match: she's not a brassy dame, and she doesn't have a grifter's soul. (She's least convincing when handing out calling cards promising to reduce ladies' varicose veins.) Though Peters can do broad comedy in her sleep, her appeal is in her mystique and her desirability, touched by weirdness and melancholy. She shines in the big production numbers—who wouldn't?—and in her scenes with Horace Vandergelder (Victor Garber, ably taking over for David Hyde Pierce). But she truly connects with Dolly only in her soliloquies, addressed to her late husband, Ephraim—and in those moments, she's sublime. (*Shubert*, 225 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

### Kings

Sydney Millsap (Eisa Davis) has won a special election to the House, becoming the first woman and first person of color ever to represent her North Dallas district, as everyone likes to remind her. Now she's running for reelection with a serious handicap: she's compulsively frank, and her first impulse is always to spar openly with anyone she deems corrupt, which, in Washington circles, is everybody. Sarah Burgess's rhetorically precise and often acidly witty script contrasts Millsap with three consummate Washington insiders, two of them lobbyists (Aya Cash and Gillian Jacobs) and the third a long-serving, avuncular, and unprincipled Texas senator named John McDowell (Zach Grenier). As performed by a flawless Davis, Millsap is, thankfully, no caricature of a righteous crusader, and the play, directed by Thomas Kail, feels like an authentic education in how money works in D.C. (*Public*, 425 Lafayette St. 212-967-7555.)

### A Walk with Mr. Heifetz

In 1926, the renowned violinist Jascha Heifetz gave a concert in a kibbutz's quarry in Palestine. James Inverne sets his ponderous play, produced by Primary Stages, not at that intriguing event but shortly thereafter, when a local musician, Yehuda Sharett (Yuval Boim), takes Heifetz (Adam Green) on an unlikely hike. For Sharett, music is a direct expression of identity—in his case, of his Jewishness—and he's startled by his companion's reluctance to open up. Still, Heifetz talks Sharett into studying music in Germany. The play then fast-forwards to 1945 and an even flatter conversation between Yehuda and his brother, the future Israeli Prime Minister Moshe Sharett (Erik Lochtefeld). Yehuda is mourning his wife and sister, and Moshe pointedly reminds him of the power of music. Alas, the most vivid illustration of that power comes from the violinist Mariella Haub's keening live underscore, rather than from the play itself. (*Cherry Lane*, 38 Commerce St. 866-811-4111. Through March 4.)

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## ALSO NOTABLE

**The Band's Visit** Ethel Barrymore. • **Black Light** Joe's Pub. • **Bright Colors and Bold Patterns** SoHo Playhouse. • **Disco Pigs** Irish Repertory. Through March 4. • **Farinelli and the King** Belasco. • **Fill Fill Fill Fill Fill Fill** Flea. Through March 4. • **Fire and Air** Classic Stage Company. Through March 2. • **Flight** The Heath at the McKittrick Hotel. • **In the Body of the World** City Center Stage I. • **John Lithgow: Stories by Heart** American Airlines Theatre. Through March 4. • **Once on This Island** Circle in the Square. • **The Parisian Woman** Hudson. • **[Porto]** McGinn/Cazale. Through March 4. • **Relevance** Lucille Lortel. • **SpongeBob SquarePants** Palace. • **Springsteen on Broadway** Walter Kerr.



# MOVIES

## NOW PLAYING

### Annihilation

In this numbingly ludicrous science-fiction drama, written and directed by Alex Garland, a talented cast of actors play undeveloped characters delivering leaden dialogue in a haphazard story that's filmed with a bland slickness. Natalie Portman stars as Lena, a medical-school professor and former Army officer whose husband, Kane (Oscar Isaac), a soldier reported dead, turns up gravely ill. En route to a hospital, they are both spirited to a top-secret military facility where Lena learns that Kane penetrated "the Shimmer," a strange rainbow curtain that surrounds a large seaside nature preserve, and she soon joins four other officers (Jennifer Jason Leigh, Tessa Thompson, Gina Rodriguez, and Tuva Novotny) on a mission to explore its mysteries. It turns out that it involves aliens and some heavy-duty gene splicing; the five women confront some conveniently contrived personal issues while facing attack from a random batch of monsters. Near the end of the film, however, a few elements of design, such as crystalline trees, reveal some inspiration, and a grand conflagration suggests the proximity of the ridiculous to the sublime.—*Richard Brody* (In wide release.)

### Black Panther

Nothing in Ryan Coogler's previous features, "Fruitvale Station" (2013) and "Creed" (2015), prepared us for the scale of his latest enterprise. Each of those movies probed the experience of a single African-American in detail, and in situ, close to home, whereas the new story summons a fresh homeland altogether—the fictional African nation of Wakanda, which is rich in resources and mightily skilled at concealing them from the outside world. The throne has passed to a young monarch, T'Challa (Chadwick Boseman), who, among his other virtues, is a superhero, donning a special suit to fend off those who threaten his country's peace. They include an arms dealer (Andy Serkis) who steals vibranium, the magical ore that is mined in Wakanda, and a warrior known as Killmonger (Michael B. Jordan), who deems himself more fit to rule than T'Challa. The whole saga marks a startling departure for the house of Marvel, not just in the actors of color who throng the screen but also in the compound of comic-book extravagance and utopian politics. For the most part, the mixture works. With Angela Bassett, Lupita Nyong'o, Forest Whitaker, and, as the king's younger sister, the spirited Letitia Wright.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 2/26/18.) (In wide release.)

### Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?

Travis Wilkerson's extraordinary first-person documentary—he directed, wrote, filmed, edited, narrated, recorded the sound, and even performed the score—is a bitterly revelatory work of history, a monstrous family story, and an unflinching view of current politics. He visits his mother's home town of Dothan, Alabama, to investigate an ugly bit of family lore: in 1946, his great-grandfather, S. E. Branch, a grocer, who was white, killed a black man, Bill Spann, in the store, and faced no charges. Wilkerson's mother and one of his aunts offer reminiscences—awful ones—about Branch; another aunt, a pro-Confederacy activist, offers excuses. He speaks

with Ed Vaughn, a local civil-rights activist and retired politician, about the region's legacy of racism; he travels to nearby Abbeville, the site of the rape of Recy Taylor, a black woman, by six white men, in 1944, and traces Rosa Parks's work at the time to seek justice for her. Seeking Spann's grave, Wilkerson finds himself in Ku Klux Klan territory, where he meets a black official working in fear and experiences threats first hand. As disclosures of past and present horrors mount, Wilkerson tints and superimposes images, suggesting their inadequacy to the agonies, both historical and intimate, of enforced silences and erased lives.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

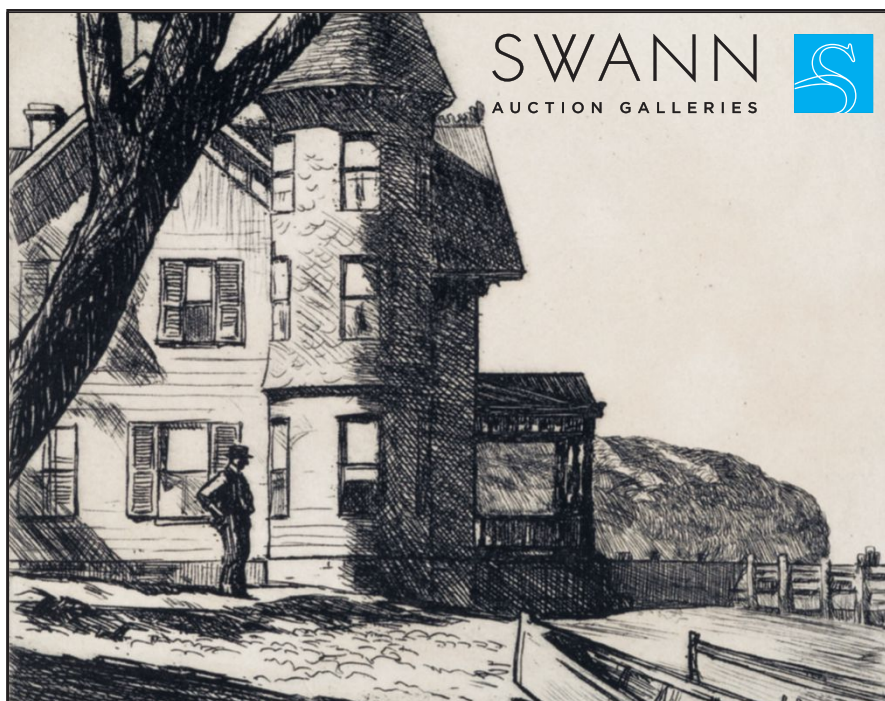
### Early Man

Nick Park's new exercise in stop-motion animation—the same technique that gave quivering and malleable life to Wallace and Gromit—yanks us back to the prehistoric age and thus, inevitably, to the dawn of soccer. A tranquil tribe, whose sylvan way of life is interrupted by a gang of marauders (supposedly more advanced, and without doubt more heavily armored), competes with them on the playing field for the right to inhabit the precious forest. The leader of the underdogs is Dug (voiced by Eddie Redmayne), and his opposition is Lord Nooth (Tom Hiddleston), who, for reasons best known to himself, sounds French. The gags, as ever, are strewn with generosity, and, since we are watching the work of Aardman

Animations, the minutiae are handled with delectable care. The anachronisms, too, are of the best sort—that is to say, the most honestly unabashed. By the lofty standards that Park has set for himself, however, and which have been met time and again in his shorter films, the new adventure feels stretched out and lacking in comic compression; where, you wonder, is Gromit when we need him? With the voices of Maisie Williams, Miriam Margolyes, and Timothy Spall.—*A.L.* (2/26/18) (In wide release.)

### The 15:17 to Paris

With wide-eyed wonder, Clint Eastwood tells the real-life story of three young American men who, in 2015, thwarted a terrorist attack aboard a train bound for Paris. His admiration and astonishment are embodied in his gonzo casting of the three men—Spencer Stone, Anthony Sadler, and Alek Skarlatos—as themselves. (All first-time actors, they perform with lively earnestness.) The attack takes only about ten minutes of screen time; most of the film traces their friendship, starting in middle school, in Sacramento, in 2005, when the three boys, disdained and angry, bond—and become obsessed with playing war. After some floundering, Spencer and Alek enter military service; Anthony goes to college. The three young men take a jaunty summer trip through Europe and, as if they've been training for it, they make history. Eastwood's film (written by Dorothy Blyskal) only masquerades as a drama; it's a thesis about the traits that forge the men's heroism. There's also a bit of politics—a view of social trends that foster or frustrate the men's best qualities—but it hardly figures into Eastwood's briskly ecstatic vision of the lives of secular saints.—*R.B.* (In wide release.)



Edward Hopper, *House by a River* (detail), etching, 1919. Estimate \$100,000 to \$150,000.

## 19th & 20th Century Prints & Drawings

March 13

Todd Weyman • [tweyman@swanngalleries.com](mailto:tweyman@swanngalleries.com)

Preview: March 8 to 9, 10-6; March 10, 12-5; March 12, 10-6

104 East 25th St, New York, NY 10010 • tel 212 254 4710 • [SWANNGALLERIES.COM](http://SWANNGALLERIES.COM)



### Loveless

The new movie from Andrei Zvyagintsev, who made “The Return” (2003) and “Leviathan” (2014), is no less bleak than its precursors. Alyosha (Matvey Novikov), age twelve, is the only child of Zhenya (Maryana Spivak) and Boris (Aleksey Rozin), whose marriage is inches away from collapse. They all still live together, just about, in a Moscow apartment block, but each adult has a lover (Boris’s girlfriend is pregnant), leaving no one around to love the boy. When he vanishes, it takes his parents a while to notice, and longer still to panic. The police are unable to help; as so often in Zvyagintsev’s films, the state is at best incompetent and at worst oppressively corrupt. Instead, it is volunteers who start a search, and the camera prowls with them through empty woodlands and the husks of ruined buildings—a dank rebuke to the new existence, adorned with cell phones and exercise machines, that Zhenya covets. As in Antonioni’s “L’Avventura” (1960), the plot feels at once gripping and open-ended, but that film’s mood of cool mystery is supplanted here by an atmosphere of hopelessness and spite. In Russian.—*A.L.* (2/12 & 19/18) (In limited release.)

### The Touch

The eternal triangle, 1971-style, done to a turn by Ingmar Bergman. Elliott Gould stars as David, a Jewish bull in a Swedish china shop. A German refugee, raised in New York and educated in Israel, he arrives in a rustic Swedish village to work on an archeological dig and meets Karin (Bibi Andersson), a starchy doctor’s frustrated wife. The two begin a fierce, desperate affair. The passionate and willful David enlivens—even in his bursts of violence—the orderly chill of Karin’s domestic routine, yet, when her staid husband (Max von Sydow) compels her to make a choice, she is paralyzed between duty and the abyss. With a prowling camera, Bergman hardly explains his characters’ outer circumstances—instead, he pursues them in their most vulnerable moments, with highly inflected, painfully intimate closeups that bare their souls. The harsh contrasts of the movie’s rich, painterly color scheme—pitting the crisp, clean whiteness of the home against the musky green walls of the love nest, and the swarthy of Gould’s dark-bearded behemoth against the Swedish couple’s papery pallor—are imprints of the characters’ inner torments. In Swedish and English.—*R.B.* (Film Forum, March 1.)

### Werewolf

By means of ferociously intimate images, tensely controlled performances, and a spare sense of drama, Ashley McKenzie’s first feature, about two young drug addicts in Nova Scotia, conjures a state of heightened consciousness. It’s the story of Nessa (Bhreagh MacNeil), age nineteen, and her boyfriend, Blaise (Andrew Gillis), who live in an abandoned trailer in the woods and measure out their days in methadone doses administered by a local clinic while scrounging for small pay by mowing lawns on stolen gasoline. Going home to her mother, Nessa tries to change her life, finding a job at a nearby ice-cream stand. (Extreme closeups of the food she prepares and the tasks she masters suggest a grasp on the first rungs, both aesthetic and practical, of autonomy.) Meanwhile, Blaise—hoping to salvage a life with Nessa—reacts angrily to the regulations that the social-services system imposes on addicts and contends with his physical cravings and deadened emotions. Working with the cinematographer Scott Moore, McKenzie frames her characters with a radical obliqueness, visually conveying their wounded tenderness and stifled fury and evoking mortal struggles with minuscule gestures.—*R.B.* (In limited release.)

## DANCE



### Flames Rise Again

Alexei Ratmanský’s “*Flames of Paris*” comes to American cinemas.

When the Russian people, in 1918, killed their tsar and declared the triumph of the proletariat, one of the first things they felt had to be eliminated was classical ballet, which, as they saw it, was the very symbol of the iron-and-lace rule of the hereditary aristocracy. But Lenin’s cultural commissar, Anatoly Lunacharsky, adored ballet, and he managed to convince the new leaders that, however expensive, this art would benefit their revolution—give it polish, and a pedigree. What could be more Russian than ballet? Did the Russians really want to throw it out?

No, as it transpired. Once ordinary Russians could get a seat at the ballet, they found they liked it very much. So the job for Soviet ballet-makers was to keep classical dance but make it look Communist, and they did their best, notably with the invention of what is called *drambalet*, in the nineteen-thirties. As the name indicates, this was a species of ballet that shifted the emphasis from pure classical dancing to stories, particularly those of common people vanquishing cruel overlords.

One of the first Russian productions to deserve the name *drambalet* was “The Flames of Paris,” which found its home at the Bolshoi Ballet, in Moscow, in 1933. Insofar as one can figure out the plot of “Flames” today, it had several pairs of

people in love with each other and many others locked in mortal enmity: a dichotomy supposedly representative of the French Revolution but also, as the Soviet audience would not have failed to notice, symbolizing the Russian Revolution. To please the balletomanes, the piece included several classical pas de deux; to satisfy the political bosses, the ensemble was made the hero of the show. Masses of dancers stormed across the stage, half obscured by the smoke from their torches, creating what the ballet-makers believed was an image of the future.

Since the collapse of the U.S.S.R., the ballets of the Soviet period have largely fallen from favor, but not with everyone. Notably, Alexei Ratmanský, the artist-in-residence at American Ballet Theatre, has found in his heart an attachment to the old Bolshoi repertory, which is what he was trained in as a boy. He also directed the company from 2004 to 2008. And so he has revised and remounted for the Bolshoi many of its Stalinist-era ballets, including “The Flames of Paris.” All but about twenty-five minutes of the choreography was lost, but Ratmanský filled the holes, and also slimmed down the plot. Since 2010, the company has been showing films of these resurrected ballets in American movie theatres. (Screenings and locations are listed on [bolshoiballetincinema.com](http://bolshoiballetincinema.com).) “The Flames of Paris” comes to town on March 4.

—Joan Acocella

### New York City Ballet

The company's first season since the departure of its longtime artistic director, Peter Martins, draws to a close. You can't go wrong with the Balanchine-Stravinsky program, which includes both the modernist "Agon" and the driving "Symphony in Three Movements." "Divertimento from 'Le Baiser de la Fée,'" also on the program, is a seldom performed gem: an abstract suite based on a Hans Christian Andersen story about a man separated from the woman he loves by a malevolent spirit. The other program includes Justin Peck's recent spare, elegant work "The Decalogue" and the zany fantasy-ballet "Namouna, a Grand Divertissement," by Alexei Ratmansky. • Feb. 27 and March 1 at 7:30, March 3 at 8, and March 4 at 3: "Divertimento from 'Le Baiser de la Fée,'" "Agon," "Duo Concertant," and "Symphony in Three Movements." • Feb. 28 at 7:30, March 2 at 8, and March 3 at 2: "Neverwhere," "MOTHERSHIP," "The Decalogue," and "Namouna, a Grand Divertissement." (David H. Koch, Lincoln Center. 212-721-6500.)

### Company Wayne McGregor / "Autobiography"

In "Autobiography," McGregor's latest work for his London-based company, he choreographs his own genome. Not sure what that means? Don't worry—McGregor's dances may use science as a starting point, but they're just as easily experienced as an onslaught of extreme physicality, bathed in high-tech lighting designs and electronica. In this case, the dance's twenty-three sections are structured with the help of an algorithm based on McGregor's personal gene sequence. Go for the science, stay for the physical prowess of the dancers and the light show. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Feb. 27-March 3.)

### "Dancing Platform Praying Grounds"

Danspace Project's latest Platform series, subtitled "Blackness, Churches, and Downtown Dance," is curated by Reggie Wilson, a wily choreographer well versed in the connections between spirituality, postmodernism, and the African diaspora. The main performances, which run through March 24, include Beth Gill and Keely Garfield, but before all that comes a free opening event at Cooper Union: speeches, recitations, song, and dance by members of Wilson's Fist and Heel Performance Group, among others. (The Great Hall at Cooper Union, 7 E. 7th St., at Third Ave. 212-353-4100. Feb. 28.)

### Jérôme Bel

"Gala" is a variation on a formula that the French provocateur has been using for years. First, assemble a motley group of performers, carefully selected to vary widely in age and professional background, among other visible differences. Then, assign them all the same dance tasks in succession, or have the group attempt to mimic each participant in some short routine of his or her own devising. The idea might be to problematize the distinctions between failure and success, but the results tend to be harmless, low-pressure in both positive and negative senses. A family-friendly *matinée* on Saturday, in conjunction with the "Tilt Kids" festival, could serve as a relatively risk-free introduction to convention-questioning conceptual dance. (N.Y.U. Skirball, 566 LaGuardia Pl. 212-998-4941. March 1-3.)

### Dance Heginbotham

John Heginbotham's choreography is characterized by quirkiness, eccentricity, and sincerity. It's an odd mix, but somehow he, and his excellent dancers, make it work. In his offbeat world, wistful waltzes and silly hand dances happily coexist. The program for the Harkness Dance Festival features excerpts from several of his longer works, including "Twin" (with electronic music by Aphex Twin) and his more recent collaboration with Maira Kalman, "The Principles of Uncertainty," as well as two new duets. (92nd Street Y, Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. March 2-3.)

### Ballet Nacional de España

The heavy hitters in this year's Flamenco Festival at City Center—the mature master Eva Yerbabuena and the young firebrand Jesús Carmona, both appearing in the second week—ground their extensions of flamenco in its roots, but the Ballet Nacional is part of a different branch. Flamenco packaged as if it were a large-scale ballet is often flamenco without soul: picturesque spectacle, drilled masses, choreographic clichés. "Suite Sevilla," one of the first works that Antonio Najarro brought to the company when he became its artistic director, in 2011, is in that tradition, varied yet shallow. (131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. March 2-4.)

## ART

### MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

#### Museum of Modern Art

"Tania Bruguera: Untitled (Havana, 2000)" The Cuban artist's video installation and performance—a terrifying sensory experience involving unstable footing, aromas, and live nude performers—was conceived, in 2000, for a vault of the storied Cabaña Fortress, as part of the Havana Biennial. (The piece is now in the collection of MOMA.) Here, the artist's visceral reckoning with the colonial origins of that eighteenth-century structure, used during the Cuban Revolution for the trials and execution of political prisoners, becomes a broader statement about authoritarianism and mass media. Viewers enter the work four at a time, walking in darkness on pungent stalks of sugarcane toward what seems to be a flickering skylight. In fact, it's a monitor hanging from the ceiling, playing clips of propaganda, including one of Fidel Castro baring his chest for an adoring crowd (to prove that he doesn't wear a bulletproof vest). The footage shifts in significance as your eyes adjust to the light, and you register the presence of the performers, silently making motions that suggest supplication or bathing. In stark contrast to the scenes onscreen, Bruguera evokes the desolation of prisoners and the suppression of the country's violent history. Eighteen years ago, her point was made even sharper when censors cut the power to her piece just hours after the Biennial's opening. (Through March 11.)

#### Met Breuer

"Leon Golub: Raw Nerve"

The occasion for this brisk survey of the Chicago-born painter, who died in 2004, at the age of eighty-two, is the gift to the museum of two of his paintings: "Gigantomachy II," from 1966, and "Vietnamese Head," from 1970. The former, a twenty-five-foot-long unstretched canvas named for a frieze from the Great Altar at Pergamon, exemplifies Golub's defining fascination with masculine violence and unresolved eroticism. Made while he was part of a Vietnam War-protest group, it depicts ten male figures with dynamic stripes of black, white, red, and blue that evoke bone, muscle, and sheer manic energy. In contrast to the heroism of the classical altar, the figures' nudity here comes across as just another sordid element of a confused battlefield. Golub's practice of scraping off paint

amplifies the effect, leaving the linen's surface looking as tortured as its scene. In "Two Black Women and a White Man," from 1986, the same frenetic technique yields a more peaceful mood: a closely observed study of three people ignoring one another, the picture has a calming, weathered beauty. The intersection of lust and fury is a through line in Golub's work (though several oil-stick drawings, made near the end of his life, including one of a blue figure masturbating, are noteworthy exceptions). Paintings derived directly from current events—a set of portraits of the Brazilian dictator Ernesto Geisel, drawings of Central American hit squads, that colorful, mutilated "Vietnamese Head"—are especially unsettling. (Through May 27.)

#### Frick Collection

"Zurbarán's Jacob and His Twelve Sons: Paintings from Auckland Castle"

Francisco de Zurbarán was the second-best painter in seventeenth-century Spain—no disgrace when the champion, his Seville-born near-exact contemporary, happened to be Diego Velázquez, who arguably remains better than anybody, ever. In this room-filling show, thirteen life-size imagined portraits, painted by Zurbarán circa 1640-45, constitute a terrific feat of Baroque storytelling: the movies of their day. Each character has a distinct personality, uniquely posed, costumed, and accessorized, and towering against a bright, clouded sky. All appear in the forty-ninth chapter of Genesis, in which the dying Jacob prophesies the fates of the founders-to-be of the Twelve Tribes of Israel. After nearly four centuries, the canvases sorely need cleaning. The brilliance of their colors has dimmed, notably in passages of brocade and other sumptuous fabrics—a forte of Zurbarán, whose father was a haberdasher. But most of the pictures retain power aplenty. Spend time with them, half an hour minimum. Their glories bloom slowly, as you register the formal decisions that practically spring the figures from their surfaces into the room with you, and as you ponder, if you will, the stories that they plumb. (Through April 22.)

#### Morgan Library and Museum

"Peter Hujar: Speed of Life"

Hujar, who died of AIDS-related pneumonia in 1987, at the age of fifty-three, was among the greatest of all American photographers and has had, by far, the most confusing reputation. This dazzling retrospective of a hundred and sixty-four



pictures, curated by Joel Smith, affirms Hujar's excellence while, if anything, complicating his history. The works range across the genres of portraiture, nudes, cityscape, and still-life—the still-est of all from the catacombs of Palermo, Italy, shot in 1963. The finest are portraits, not only of people but of cows, sheep, and, most notably, an individual goose, with an eagerly confiding mien. The quality of Hujar's prints, tending to sumptuous blacks and simmering grays, transfixes. He was a darkroom master, maintaining technical standards for which he got scant credit except among certain cognoscenti. He never hatched a signature look to rival those of more celebrated elders who influenced him (Richard Avedon, Diane Arbus) or those of younger peers who learned from him (Robert Mapplethorpe, Nan Goldin). His pictures share, in place of a style, an unflinching rigor that can only be experienced, not described. Tall and handsome, volatile, epically promiscuous, and chronically broke, Hujar lived the bohemian dream of becoming legendary rather than the bourgeois one of being rich and conventionally famous. But he craved more, hungering to have his art recognized while repeatedly forestalling the event with bristly pride. Hujar's personal glamour consorts so awkwardly with his artistic discipline that trying to keep both in mind at once can hurt your brain. But

the conundrum defines his significance at a historic crossroads of high art and low life in the late twentieth century. *Through May 20.*

## GALLERIES—CHELSEA

### Carrie Moyer

A standout at last year's Whitney Biennial, Moyer just keeps getting better. The title of her latest show, "Pagan's Rapture," describes the New York painter's long-standing approach to her medium, as well as the especially ecstatic mood of her dazzling new work. Inspired, it would seem, by natural wonders—bacteria, asteroids, deep-sea flora—and the history of biomorphic abstraction, Moyer's paintings are at once delirious and methodical, an imbrication of stains and pours, gestural blobs, and veins of glitter-rich sediment. Hard-edged shapes (sometimes rendered with clever drop shadows) lend structure to watery layers. In "Sassafras and Magma," the matte-black silhouette of a cartoonish plant is a graphic foil to the background's lava-lamp depths. In the candy-colored "Jolly Hydra: Unexplainably Juicy," dripping curtains of yellow and fuchsia begin to dissolve the geometry of the composition's serpentine arches. *Through March 22. (DC Moore, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-247-2111.)*

## GALLERIES—DOWNTOWN

### Dietmar Busse

With a fashion career already under his belt, this New York-based photographer exhibits a series of portraits he took in the German hamlet of Nendorf, his home town. The black-and-white images begin in the familiar mode of August Sander—shot head-on, and inflected with fillips of sociological mystery. But Busse paints over the prints in the darkroom using dyes and developer, turning his subjects into phantasmagorical apparitions. The subject of "Hausfrau with Shotgun and Butterflies" is outfitted with a black veil ornamented in flowers and dots; the twenty pictures in the grid-format piece "Heimat"—black-out figures, rosy trees, and white horses—seem stained with nostalgic longing. *Through March 4. (Fierman, 127 Henry St. 917-593-4086.)*

### Thornton Dial

Dial, who died in Alabama in 2016, at the age of eighty-seven, was, like Robert Rauschenberg, an American master of the assemblage, affixing found objects to canvas and slathering them in layers of paint. Crushed black cans attached to the top of an eight-foot-high piece titled "Art and Nature," from 2011 (the latest work in this twenty-year survey), release streams of pink, white, and green enamel over two halves of a white ceramic vase, each holding a branch. The result is a sardonic still-life and, perhaps, a wry commentary on his position as a so-called outsider artist. "The Color of Money: The Jungle of Justice," made while the artist was watching the O. J. Simpson trial, is a morass of plastic fauna (plus a shoe, gloves, jigsaw-puzzle pieces, rope, and more), painted dollar-bill-green. *Through March 18. (Lewis, 88 Eldridge St. 212-966-7990.)*

### Ilana Harris-Babou

It's hard to tell whether the young artist behind this exhibition, "Reparation Hardware," is fatalistic or forward-looking. The title video is shot as slickly as a commercial; in it, the artist is seen running her hands over distressed wood, wielding a crude ceramic hammer, and discussing reparations for African-Americans in the guilelessly bubbly language of eco-consumerist self-actualization. Another video shows her "red-lining" a luxury-furniture catalogue with a Sharpie. The implication is that liberal pieties about racial inequality are a moral idealism that slips all too easily into self-congratulation. *Through March 11. (Larrie, 27 Orchard St. larrie.nyc.)*

### Andrea Joyce Heimer

In detailed tableaux, the painter, who works in Washington State, adapts the stylized red-and-black figures that adorn ancient Greek vases to explore a personal dilemma in epic terms. Adopted at birth, Heimer was recently given the choice to learn the names of her birth parents, thanks to a 2015 bill passed in her native Montana. In this small-scale series, she imagines possible scenarios for her reunion with them, from wild scenes of birth and decapitation to a jubilant party. The colorful, collage-like works echo the imagery of the ceramics they're drawn from, as well as their strange pictorial space. A striking purple painting is divided into four plots of land, each with a different small house and parent, as if presenting Heimer with her options. A strip of black sky shows no less than six tornadoes on the way, an indication of how fraught she finds this guessing game. *Through March 11. (Beauchene, 327 Broome St. 212-375-8043.)*



Markus Brunetti's dazzling images of church façades (like "Lichfield, Cathedral, 2014–2017," above) take weeks to photograph and years to digitally construct. At the Yossi Milo gallery, through March 17.

# NIGHT LIFE

*Musicians and night-club proprietors lead complicated lives; it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.*



*The legendary South Bronx outfit ESG celebrates its fortieth anniversary at Bowery Electric.*

## Bass Invaders

*A band of sisters is the crown jewel of dance-punk's underground.*

You've got to hear "UFO" to believe it, and you probably already have. The single has been sampled hundreds of times since its release, in 1981, but it still escapes categorization, remaining as elusive as its namesake. The most recognizable bit is the montage of whistling, airy sirens that opens the track; it's a twelve-second texture that hip-hop, R. & B., and electronic producers have used to fill out beats for nearly thirty years. "UFO" has appeared everywhere from Mark Morrison's "Return of the Mack" to an ad that the skateboard company Supreme released last year. But the four sisters from the South Bronx who wrote and recorded it really just wanted to get folks dancing.

Valerie, Renee, Deborah, and Marie Scroggins formed ESG with Tito Libran in the late nineteen-seventies. The name stands for "emerald, sapphire, and gold": Valerie's birthstone is emerald; Renee's, sapphire; and gold was their goal. Almost immediately, the sisters hit upon an original style of live dance music that combined funk, hip-hop, punk, and Latin grooves; Renee, the group's vocalist and the eldest sister, cites James Brown as their core influence. "When James Brown took it to the bridge, he cut all the horns," she recalled in a 2015 interview. "It was just that giant bass and the drums, and letting it rip for that instant. So I said, 'Man, if

you could just take a song and make it just the bridge, wouldn't that be hot!'"

Her idea sparked ESG's self-titled debut EP, released in 1981 and produced by Martin Hannett, famous for his work with Joy Division. "Moody," a lean, quick-stepping single comprising bass, drums, and Renee's spunky vocals, gained traction on college radio and at underground clubs like the Paradise Garage, soon making the EP a must-have for house d.j.s and fans who were tuned in to New York's bubbling No Wave/post-punk scene. "UFO" was tacked on in the final recording session, to fill three spare minutes of tape. Though it took on a life of its own, the single proved too far ahead of its time—sampling laws and licensing practices weren't yet nailed down when "UFO" broke. ESG spent the next two decades chasing royalties for hit records that featured its material, and the experience left the members understandably sour on the hip-hop movement, despite their formative influence on it.

As with many seminal art bands of the eighties, major crossover fame and earnings escaped ESG, even after subsequent releases. But compilations and reissues have kept the music alive, and Valerie and Renee's daughters have joined the family business, playing alongside their mothers in recent years. ESG performs a rare set at Bowery Electric on March 8, celebrating forty years of otherworldly sounds.

—Matthew Trammell

## Bad Bunny

As the Houston Astros prepped for the World Series, the shortstop Carlos Correa took on music duties in the clubhouse, and introduced his teammates to Puerto Rico's Bad Bunny. "I don't know if you guys know who Bad Bunny is, but I don't know who Bad Bunny is, but I do now," the outfielder George Springer joked to MLB.com. Tens of millions are tuning in to the m.c., born Benito Ocasio, who chose his moniker after seeing a photo of himself as a child grimacing in bunny ears. "Diles," released in August, 2016, combines the rhythms of Atlanta rap with the agile, rabid flows of mid-aughts reggaeton artists like Daddy Yankee and Tego Calderón. Bad Bunny performs a summer's worth of hits at United Palace, in Washington Heights. (4140 Broadway. 212-568-1157. March 1-2.)

## David Byrne

"Everybody's coming to my house, and they're never gonna go back home," Byrne sings on his latest single, in an even more squirrely timbre than the one he made famous as the center of Talking Heads. The New Year brought word of a new album, "American Utopia," and a world tour featuring a twelve-piece band, the rocker's most ambitious undertaking since the Talking Heads' "Stop Making Sense" concert film. For his upcoming material, he's culled a supporting team of collaborators and session players that includes his longtime partner Brian Eno, Sampha, Jam City, and the jazz saxophonist Isaiah Barr, of Onyx Collective; he stages the new work, along with some of his beloved catalogue, at Count Basie Theatre. (99 Monmouth St., Red Bank, N.J. 732-224-8778. March 3.)

## Lucy Dacus

It takes a kind of bravery to be humorless. On the drowsy indie number "I Don't Wanna Be Funny Anymore," this singer-songwriter from Richmond, Virginia, cycles through all the yearbook superlatives she'd rather claim. "I'll read the books, and I'll be the smartest / I'll play guitar, and I'll be the artist," she declares. "Try not to laugh." But no matter her perspective at any given moment, she has a round, unhurried tone that voices indecisiveness well. After inking a deal with Matador Records, Dacus set out to record "Historian" at a studio in Nashville whose clients are usually Christian rockers. The new album is due out on March 2; she rings in its release with a set at Music Hall of Williamsburg. (66 N. 6th St., Brooklyn. 718-486-5400. March 2.)

## Deli Girls

Deli Girls put on one of the most jaw-dropping noise sets in the city; the vocalist Danielle Orłowski and the producer Tommi Kelly weave a handful of jagged numbers together with stiff precision. Kelly takes a knee behind knobby keyboards and guitar pedals spread across the floor, mashing up drum sounds like he's tending a small garden. Orłowski is all sneering energy, landing somewhere between rap and hardcore with each bark. On Bandcamp, you can click through a self-titled EP or an album, "Evidence"; both projects are dizzying visions



of noisy club-punk that feels like the kind of material Kanye West would've seized upon back when he was wearing all black. (*Secret Project Robot*, 1186 Broadway, Brooklyn. [secretprojectrobot.org](http://secretprojectrobot.org). March 1.)

### Kelela

Since 2012, this Los Angeles-based visionary has been tinkering with emotive, electric R. & B. pop. She has contributed her chameleonic vocal talents to works by Solange, Danny Brown, and Clams Casino, but her debut album, "Take Me Apart," released last October on Warp Records, is as disarmingly personal as its title suggests. There's "Better," a crushing song about a couple realizing that friendship may be the simpler option, and the savvy jam "LMK," in which the singer pleads for clarity: "It ain't that deep, either way / No one's tryna settle down / All you gotta do is let me know." Kelela makes a special appearance at Irving Plaza presented by the "Governors Ball" summer festival. (17 Irving Pl. 212-777-6800. March 2.)

### The Zombies

In the spring of 1967, these British Invasion rockers walked into Abbey Road Studios, where the Beatles had just finished recording "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band," and started tracking their own masterpiece, "Odessey and Oracle." The Zombies had a No. 1 U.S. hit ("She's Not There") just three years earlier, but, after failing to replicate that success with subsequent releases, they began plotting their split. Before bowing out, the group wanted to make one last record, and, freed from commercial expectations and outside producers, they created twelve brilliant compositions marked by complex vocal harmonies, lush orchestration, and daring key modulations that rivalled (and in some ways surpassed) the sounds on "Sgt. Pepper's." Initially, "Odessey and Oracle" bombed, and the Zombies followed through on their breakup. Two years later, they scored an unlikely hit with the album's closer, "Time of the Season," which reached No. 3 on the American charts. The Zombies began touring again in 2004; they play at City Winery this week. (155 Varick St. 212-608-0555. Feb. 28 and March 1.)

## JAZZ AND STANDARDS

### Taylor Ho Bynum

Attend a new-jazz performance in the metropolis and you'll likely stumble upon the cornettist Ho Bynum. Having studied and played with the avant-garde patriarch Anthony Braxton in the nineties, Bynum has followed his investigative muse ever since; his 9-Tette ensemble includes the guitarist **Mary Halvorson**, the saxophonist **Ingrid Laubrock**, and the bassist **Ken Filiano**, among other equally committed musical risktakers. (*Jazz Gallery*, 1160 Broadway, at 27th St., fifth fl. 646-494-3625. March 1.)

### Jazzmeia Horn

Festooned in eye-popping Afrocentric garb and scatting like nobody's business on Art Blakey's signature song, "Moanin'," Horn brought a needed blast of jazz culture to the Grammy Awards in January. A take-charge performer with a healthy yet hardly rigid respect for tradition, Horn is ready to grab her

spot in the newly fertile vocal-jazz domain. (*Jazz Standard*, 116 E. 27th St. 212-576-2232. March 1-4.)

### Charles McPherson

Finding a saxophonist versed in the language of bebop may not provide much in the way of revelatory thrills, but witnessing an authentic master of the art, like the altoist McPherson, can still elicit a genuine spinal chill. McPherson came of age in Charles Mingus's ensembles of the early sixties; these days, he fronts a rough-and-ready quintet with the guitarist **Yotam Silberstein** and the pianist **Jeb Patton**. (*Dizzy's Club Coca-Cola*, Broadway at 60th St. 212-258-9595. March 1-4.)

### Helen Sung

It's not every farsighted jazz pianist and composer who's been set on the path by way of a transformative Harry Connick, Jr., concert, but the expansive visions of the classically

trained Sung have advanced far beyond her initial inspiration. Exposing jazz and popular standards to her imaginative modifications, Sung's (re)Conception Project features the saxophonist **John Ellis** and two outstanding trumpeters, **Marquis Hill** (Friday) and **Ingrid Jensen** (Saturday and Sunday). (*Smoke*, 2751 Broadway, between 105th and 106th Sts. 212-864-6662. March 2-4.)

### Ben Wendel Seasons Band

Programmatic yet inspired, Wendel's Seasons outfit originally began as a series of online video duets that sprang from piano pieces by Tchaikovsky. Here, the saxophonist-bassoonist leader (and member of the popular band Kneebody) brings together three duet partners to give ample voice to the music: the pianist **Aaron Parks**, the bassist **Matt Brewer**, and the drummer **Eric Harland**. (*Village Vanguard*, 178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. 212-255-4037. Feb. 27-March 4.)

## ABOVE & BEYOND



### New York International Children's Film Festival

This annual festival, founded in 1997, hosts family-friendly shorts, features, Q. & A.s with directors, and national premières. (The winning films are eligible for Academy Award consideration.) Among the highlights this year are a preview of Season 2 of the Netflix adaptation of Lemony Snicket's "A Series of Unfortunate Events" and the New York première of the Japanese musical anime "Lu Over the Wall," about an aspiring musician who joins a band in search of the perfect lead singer—who turns out to be a mermaid. (*Various locations*. [nyicff.org](http://nyicff.org). Feb. 23-March 18.)

## AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

The "Contemporary Curated" sale at **Sotheby's** (March 2) offers a wide selection of post-war and contemporary works at a variety of prices, from a photographic print by Nan Goldin of her glamorous friend Ivy posing in front of a Warhol "Marilyn"—not too expensive—to a petite but pricey mobile by Calder in bold primary colors. A collection of contemporary art goes under the gavel a few days later (March 5); several of the pieces, including an enormous steel sculpture by Serge Spitzer ("Treework"), come from a sprawling estate in Westhampton. (*York Ave. at 72nd St.* 212-606-7000.) • **Christie's** holds two mid-season, non-blockbuster auctions of contemporary art this week, starting with prints and

multiples on Feb. 28 and moving on to post-war and contemporary paintings on March 1. The latter sale is led by a cheerful Sam Francis canvas from 1958, "Blue, Yellow, and Green." (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.) • The season kicks off this week at **Phillips**, which will be presenting one of its "New Now" sales, a category that combines emerging artists with more established names (Feb. 28). The star lot here is a 1999 canvas, "Nude Homeless Drinker," by the New York-based painter George Condo. In it, a cartoonish female figure, midway between Goofy and a Gauguin beauty, chugs the contents of a green bottle. (450 Park Ave. 212-940-1200.)

## READINGS AND TALKS

### 92nd Street Y

Scott Weiner enjoys the enviable title of pizza historian; a favorite meal turned into an obsession as he researched the history and the science behind the iconic dish and began hosting expeditions to landmark restaurants. This week, Weiner homes in on female contributions to the pizza pantheon, dishing on early street vendors, the import industry, and international developments to the recipe sparked by women chefs and sellers. Samples from the pizzeria Kesté will be served as Weiner presents his findings in conversation with its *pizzaiola*, Giorgia Caporuscio, who has shepherded the family restaurant since 2012. (1395 Lexington Ave. 212-415-5500. March 5 at 7.)

# FOOD & DRINK



## TABLES FOR TWO

### 2nd Floor Bar & Essen

1442 First Ave., at 75th St. (212-737-1700)

Jewish deli food and appetizing are not the world's sexiest culinary traditions, but in the past few years a wave of restaurants with young proprietors—Mile End, Russ and Daughters Café, Frankel's—have remarketed pastrami sandwiches and bagels with smoked fish for a new generation. At 2nd Floor Bar & Essen (Yiddish for “food”), above the 2nd Ave Deli on the Upper East Side, the millennial makeover goes a step further: the kinds of Old World dishes my great-grandmother made for her family of eight in their East 105th Street tenement kitchen are given the fussy small-plate treatment. A dish called Herring in a Fur Coat comes with “pumpernickel dust.” Tongue is sandwiched between “challah medallions.”

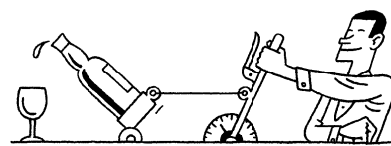
It seems, at first, like the stuff of parody. The Chesterfield-style booths are comfortable, but the pre-electricity-level lighting turns even twentysomethings on JSwipe dates into their boomer parents, straining to make out the all-Israeli wine list with iPhone flashlights. Much of the food, though, from the chef David Teyf, is actually quite good, and at the very least upholds, with admirable panache, a cuisine that is largely fading away. Two recent meals began with an amuse-bouche: bite-size cubes of an eggy, oniony casserole presented as “matzo babka,” a study in the

Jewish art of making the world's most tasteless cracker into something delicious. Gefilte fish, that Passover punch line, an often sugared mash of ground carp, pike, or whitefish, becomes very nearly elegant in the hands of Teyf, who cuts through the cloying sweetness by using it as filling for crisp, salty bread-crum croquettes. Even Manischewitz is convincingly dolled up, for a cocktail called the Man-O-Manischewitz (a reference to the company's old ad campaigns): mulled with lemon and cinnamon, then chilled and served in a mini-carafe, to be added to taste to a tumbler of herby gin on the rocks.

Some dishes don't transcend their nostalgic value, including that Herring in a Fur Coat, which looks, in the dark, like a tiny pink layer cake, making its mushy riot of ingredients (salmon roe, shredded beets, rémoulade) all the more jarring. And despite the small portions the menu is relentlessly heavy. The stuffed helzel, a sort of oversized dumpling, consists of two pieces of fatty chicken skin, stitched together with string, filled with a paste of flour and schmaltz, and fried until crisp. It's not the sort of thing you should eat every night, or even every month. That said, I'm glad that someone is still making it. I watched with only a twinge of envy, one recent evening, as Teyf himself sat down to a spread that included an exotic off-menu item: a lush green salad. (Dishes \$12–\$36.)

—Hannah Goldfield

## BAR TAB



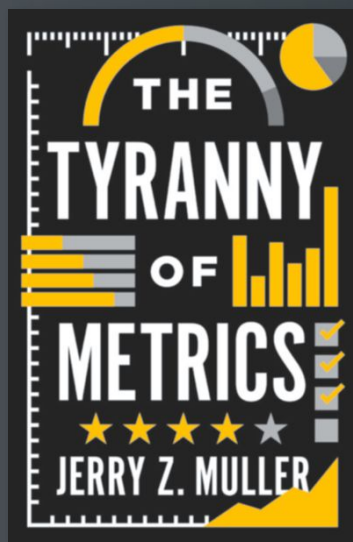
### The Way Station

683 Washington Ave., Brooklyn (347-627-4949)

“Don't blink,” the British sci-fi television series “Doctor Who” instructed its fans, or alien psychopaths will steal you away from everything you love. At the Way Station, a “Doctor Who”-themed bar home to nothing more threatening than a rollicking liquor pour, that advice is still best heeded. Here, blink and you could miss the bar's bathroom, which masquerades as the show's time-travelling spaceship, the Tardis (the toilet experience is not as transportive as it sounds). Or, on burlesque night, miss at your peril a woman costumed as a lamp undressing to a leopard-print thong and switching her light off. Are the burlesque performers Whovians? “We're pan-nerds,” said the erstwhile lamp. Asked to identify the subject of the Oscar-nominated film “Phantom Thread,” she guessed “a Jedi sweatshop.” (Incorrect. The movie is about omelettes.) At the bar, a man in a beanie worried to a bartender with a blue pixie cut, “I've got to not be wasted in, like, three hours,” and accepted a house lager. A customer under less duress considered a Machete (powdered cocoa mix, hot water, jalapeño-tequila shot), but requested a 4th Doctor, a hot-pants-red whirl of rum, pineapple juice, and grenadine. On an astronomy trivia night, a geologist said that the world's first “satellite” was a delinquent carrier pigeon, penitently made to wear a camera in 1910. Someday soon, the geologist continued, satellites as small as shoeboxes may provide high-speed Internet worldwide. The audience murmured. Could the universe ever be so wondrous?—Elizabeth Barber



# CHANGING THE CONVERSATIONS THAT CHANGE THE WORLD



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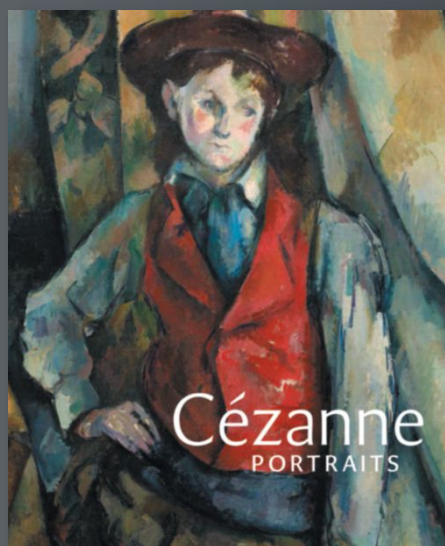
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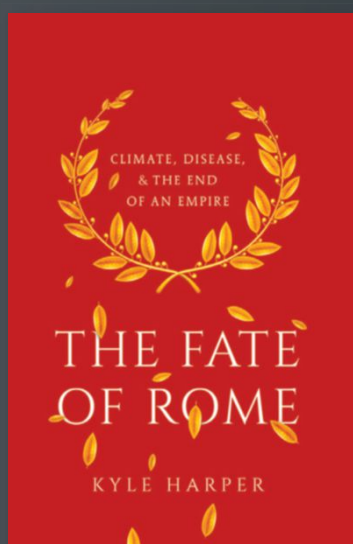
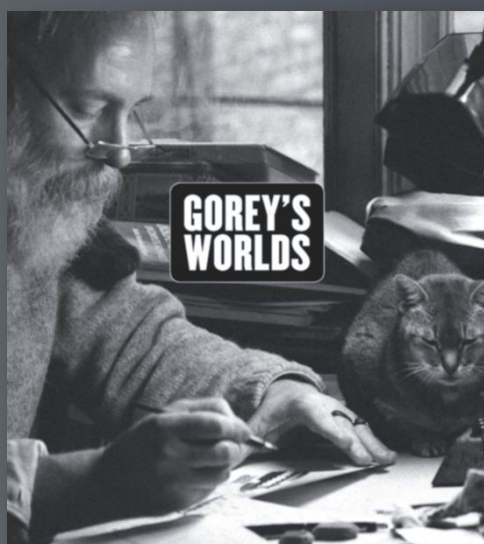
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—James Romm, *Wall Street Journal*



## THE TALK OF THE TOWN

### COMMENT INDICTED

Robert Mueller, the special counsel investigating possible Russian interference in the 2016 Presidential election, has lately been moving so fast that it is becoming difficult to keep track of the intricate levels of deception, and self-deception, described in the indictments that he brings. Last Thursday, Mueller charged Paul Manafort, Donald Trump's former campaign chairman, with a multimillion-dollar fraud related to, of all things, mortgages. The indictment also names Manafort's associate Rick Gates, the former deputy campaign chair; both men had earlier been charged with laundering millions of dollars that they had collected as lobbyists for the government of Ukraine, and had said that they would fight the charges. By Friday, though, Gates had pleaded guilty to two counts: conspiracy with regard to the financial crimes, and lying to investigators—a lie that he had apparently told, recklessly enough, in prior plea talks—and prosecutors had unsealed a revised indictment, directed, this time, only at Manafort.

Just a few days earlier, a former attorney at the law firm Skadden Arps pleaded guilty to lying to investigators about conversations he had had with Gates regarding work that the firm did for Ukraine. The week before *that*, Mueller indicted thirteen Russian nationals on charges related to their involvement in the Internet Research Agency, a social-media mill, alleging that it used illegal means to promote Trump's candidacy.

Its efforts included buying ads on social media and digitally impersonating Trump supporters in Florida and "Blacktivists." Michael Flynn, the President's former national-security adviser, had already pleaded guilty to lying to investigators (he was also in legal jeopardy because of his work as an unregistered foreign lobbyist) and is now cooperating with the investigation. So is George Papadopoulos, a former campaign adviser, who pleaded guilty to lying about his foreign contacts.

None of the charges, so far, directly address whether the Trump campaign knowingly colluded with the Russians, or whether the President himself obstructed justice. The list of people who are cooperating, however, suggests that Mueller may be getting close on both points, particularly if Manafort joins them. As campaign chairman, he sat in

on the now famous June 9, 2016, Trump Tower meeting with Donald Trump, Jr., Jared Kushner, and a Russian lawyer who had offered "dirt" on the Clinton campaign. Manafort left the campaign two months later, but Gates stayed on through the election, and may therefore have much more to tell.

But, for all the talk of Kremlin puppetry and intelligence operations, the heart of the offenses that Mueller has laid out involves the normal aspects of American politics, particularly the opacity of campaign finance, and the startling sums involved. When Nate Silver, of FiveThirtyEight, looked at the issue of whether the Russian efforts had swung the election for Trump, he hesitated over the question of scale. According to the indictment, the Internet Research Agency had, at one point, budgeted \$1.2 million a month, spread among a number of countries it was targeting. The reported spending by the Trump campaign and associated PACs was six hundred and seventeen million dollars; for the Clinton campaign and associated PACs, it was \$1.2 billion.

And the Russian effort echoed themes that were already a factor in the election: the Internet Research Agency allegedly paid someone to dress up as Clinton in a prison uniform; the Trump campaign sold "Clinton for Prison" gear on its Web site, and American PACs have been paying for ads calling her a criminal since the time of her husband's Administration. Which way did the influence run?

In some respects, though, there were





more ways to hold the Russians accountable than their domestic competitors. It is illegal for foreign nationals, aside from green-card holders, to give money to or spend money on American electoral campaigns. That is why Mueller was able to charge the thirteen Russians with perpetrating a conspiracy to defraud the Federal Election Commission. Bob Bauer, who served as White House counsel under Barack Obama, noted, in a piece for JustSecurity.org, that the Supreme Court has upheld campaign-finance restrictions on foreigners because of the importance of citizenship in preserving “the basic conception of a political community.” Yet the Justices have been far more lax when it comes to corporate and independent-group spending. The 2010 decision in *Citizens United*, and in cases that followed, has yielded a glut of dark money.

As a result, we’ve come to expect

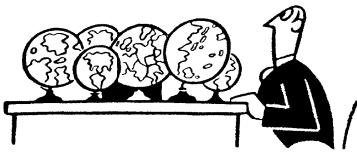
that ads, even for candidates we like, will be paid for by groups with vague names that give no real clue as to who is behind them. Our curiosity has been numbed, even as our political imagination has been frazzled by the endless conspiracy theories that such organizations push. Specific measures to increase transparency, like better screening of advertisers by Facebook and Twitter’s recent purge of bots, might help. Larger measures, such as promoting digital literacy and civics education, take time. But, while social media and bots are the engine, money is the fuel, and there isn’t likely to be a real solution to that without comprehensive campaign-finance reform. The crassness of the dealings documented in the Mueller indictments reflects a political culture in which foreign countries, as well as Americans, routinely pay millions to influence politicians, whether through lobbying

firms or PACs. Meanwhile, it wouldn’t be surprising if, in the 2020 election, some super PACs referred to the Mueller indictment as a guide for using social media to organize fake grassroots initiatives.

Another observation one can make, reading the indictments, is that Trump has not surrounded himself with the best people. The bots are not the only ones who come across as preposterous impostors. How did Manafort manage to pass himself off as the adult in the room in a major party’s Presidential campaign? How did Gates hang on in Trump’s orbit, even after Manafort was pushed out? How was Papadopoulos given a seat at high-level meetings? How was Flynn seen as a prudent adviser on matters of national security? Then, there is Trump himself. But he is a distinctly American problem. Dealing with the Russians may be the easy part.

—Amy Davidson Sorkin

## MONTGOMERY POSTCARD HATE PATROL



Last week, Heidi Beirich gave a visitor a tour of the Southern Poverty Law Center’s office, in downtown Montgomery, Alabama. The following day, the nonprofit would unveil its annual Hate Map of America, a main feature of the spring issue of its biannual *Intelligence Report*, which focusses on the radical right. A wall was plastered with past covers. One read “REBELS WITH A CAUSE.” It was illustrated with a very un-James-Dean-ish image of neo-Confederates. She pointed to a cover from 2014. “This line I came up with,” she said. “WHITE HOMICIDE WORLDWIDE.”

Beirich, who has a Ph.D. in political science, began working at the S.P.L.C. as an intern, in 1999, and is now the director of its Intelligence Project. She became interested in hate groups in high school, in Vista, California. “The White Aryan Resistance were recruiting people out of my class,” she said. “That’s something you don’t forget.

“This was our first international issue,”

Beirich went on, pointing to a 2001 cover bearing the line “DANGEROUS LIAISONS.” “We showed connections between people like Jared Taylor”—the white nationalist who edited the Web site *American Renaissance*—“and his European equivalents.” She added, “Nowadays, this seems totally normal, with Nigel Farage on Fox.”

Other covers include “AGE OF RAGE: ANGRY YOUNG RACISTS ARE READY TO RUMBLE” (2004) and “HOLY WAR: THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT’S CRUSADE AGAINST GAYS HEATS UP” (2005). A screaming Donald Trump graced last year’s spring cover. (“I doubt he put that one in his trophy room,” Beirich said, laughing.) This year’s cover is a collage of a dozen white men, wearing sunglasses and hoisting hate flags, who marched with tiki torches in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Sitting down at a conference table, Beirich pulled out the newest Hate Map, which had nine hundred and fifty-four dots, mostly clustered around urban centers. Last year, there were nine hundred and seventeen. Each of the groups on the map was identified by a symbol signifying its particular stripe of hatefulness: white nationalist, racist skinhead, black nationalist, anti-L.G.B.T., general hate, and so on. Beirich said, “The bulk of the increase is neo-Nazi groups, which went up by twenty-two, to a hundred and twenty-

one. A banner year for Nazis, buoyed by Trump.” Other increases: anti-Muslim groups (from a hundred and one to a hundred and fourteen); anti-immigrant groups (fourteen to twenty-two); and anti-government groups (six hundred and twenty-three to six hundred and eighty-nine). “There are lots of these folks popping out of the woodwork,” she added.

“The Klan collapsed, almost by half, down to seventy-two groups,” Beirich continued. “People in Identity Evropa, Richard Spencer’s various outfits, and other white supremacists—they don’t have as much interest in the Klan thing. They’ve got their ‘fasc-y’ haircuts and their little polo shirts. The Klan, as a style, is dying. But it is the iconic American hate group. Our first report was just *Klan-watch*. But these young people, they’re more influenced by Europe’s identitarian movement.” She told her white male visitor, “You could fit in.”

Another trend: “The black hate groups are up. The second-biggest percentage growth, behind the Nazis.” She went on, “Some blacks have just given up on the United States of Trump and Sessions, and their abandonment of police reforms and civil rights. It’s not surprising.”

Beirich pointed to a dot on the map labelled “Aggressive Christianity,” the name of a New Mexico group whose

members have faced charges of child sex abuse; a couple of New Jersey skinhead groups; and Hatreon, which she described as “a Texan crowdfunding site for bad guys.” Hate groups in New York are up, too. “This one is interesting,” she said. “The Proud Boys, started by Gavin McInnes, a co-founder of Vice. It’s pro-Western chauvinism. Extremely misogynistic. Rabidly anti-Islamic. They have a fraternal order of alt-knights. You get the idea.”

Beirich explained that the S.P.L.C. learns about hate groups from Web data scraping, cops, newspaper reporters, and its own research on the ground. As a practical necessity, some S.P.L.C. researchers “become sort of frenemies” with bigots. She herself has received dozens of e-mails, since 2013, from Jordan Jeréb, a leader of the Republic of Florida, a group erroneously linked to Nikolas Cruz, the Parkland school shooter. Jeréb has long been begging Beirich to include his group on the Hate Map.

“When we first went down to check them out,” Beirich said, “it seemed like just a couple kids barely old enough to buy guns.” This year, the group made the list. “I’ll probably be getting an excited e-mail from Jordan,” she said, sighing.

Beirich escapes as often as possible to a cabin in the mountains. “There’s this huge corkboard in the living room that has pictures of maybe thirty people we’re concerned about,” she said. She named Cody Wilson, Andrew Anglin, and Andrew Auernheimer (“this scary anti-Semitic hacker”). She added, “A colleague put a photo of Jimmy Buffett up there as a joke. When my family came to visit, my mom’s boyfriend was, like, ‘How is Jimmy connected to the hate movement?’ My younger brother was just, like, ‘Who’s that guy on the boat with his shirt off?’”

—Charles Bethea

## LEGACY DEPT. FLAMES



Last week, the Irish novelist Edna O’Brien was in town to receive the PEN/Nabokov Award for Achievement in International Literature. O’Brien, who has “broken down social and sexual bar-

riers for women,” as the organization’s press release put it, received the prize from the Irish novelist Colum McCann. O’Brien and McCann have been friends since 1994, when they met at his London publishing house on the day that McCann’s first story collection appeared, and O’Brien invited him to read with her that evening. Later, when she was in New York, they liked to go to Ulysses’, on Pearl Street, with the Irish writer Frank McCourt.

The day before the ceremony, O’Brien and McCann met for tea in the Tennyson Room of the Lotos Club, and O’Brien reminisced about staying at the now defunct Wyndham, on West Fifty-eighth Street, where, decades ago, she used to share an elevator with Franco Zeffirelli and run into Joan Fontaine picking up her newspaper on Sunday morning. “I did set one story in New York that isn’t a dud,” she said.

“You can’t write a dud,” McCann said, checking the teapot. He was wearing a linen jacket with a long, very thin scarf.

She was referring to “Manhattan Medley,” a love letter to a married man with whom the narrator is having an affair. The story is a favorite of Philip Roth’s.

“It’s a love story,” she said. O’Brien, who has the voice, high cheekbones, and slightly exaggerated gestures of a stage actress, often looks into the distance as she talks, as if she were seeing a vision. She was wearing a black sparkly cardigan with a large brooch, and a long silver necklace. “It’s a love story told differently, because the love ain’t happening. Well, that happens a lot.” Since the publication, in 1960, of her debut novel, the autobiographical “The Country Girls,” which was banned by the Irish censor for its descriptions of female sexuality, O’Brien has written more than thirty books. In “Night,” published in 1972, the narrator recalls her childhood in Ireland and love affairs in London while lying awake in a four-poster bed. “I was off the wall,” O’Brien said, of the state in which she wrote it. “I’d had my one and only and definitely profound and definitely traumatic experience with hard drugs.” She was a patient of the psychiatrist R. D. Laing, who experimented with high-grade LSD as part of his treatment. “He wanted to be a poet,” O’Brien said, lifting her right hand and making it tremble. “My mind was on stilts.”

O’Brien talked about a research trip she’d recently taken to Nigeria for a novel she is working on, called “Girl,” inspired by the kidnapping of schoolgirls by Boko Haram.

McCann shook his head in wonderment. “You’ve been #MeToo-ing for the last fifty years,” he said.

O’Brien nodded at the mention of the movement. “I think it’s very laudable,” she said. She raised a cautionary finger. “But sometimes, with a cause, even a very just and necessary and visceral cause, it gets mixed in with what I call self-promotion, fashion, and a kind of



Edna O’Brien

straying from the gravity of the message.” She took a piece of sponge cake from a silver plate. “People are very mistrustful, aren’t they, of art and of poetry and of real writing? They much more go for a tweet and a twit—whatever.”

In 2009, McCann won a National Book Award, for “Let the Great World Spin.” He dedicated the prize to McCourt, who died that year, at the age of seventy-eight. In his acceptance speech in New York, he said, “I think he’s dancing upstairs . . . with the J.C. and the Mary M. and the twelve hot boys, and in the morning all will be forgiven.”

“I was in Dublin that evening,” O’Brien said. “And I said, ‘I’m going to light a candle for you.’ Do you remember?”

“I do, I do,” McCann said.

“I’d had a recent hip operation,” O’Brien went on. “There’s one chapel—which they now like to call a church, but it’s a chapel in my mythology—where I wanted to light this candle. And it was



pouring rain—not a taxi between here and—” O’Brien hesitated.

“Portobello,” McCann said.

“Kilimanjaro,” O’Brien said. “Anyhow, I went off and lit the candle.” She paused. “It’s so funny about candles. I remember Frank McCourt saying once, ‘You know, you have to have real flame.’ Because now they have a little thing, you press a button and a light comes on inside a bulb.” She looked serious. “That isn’t urgent. That’s not going up.” She pointed toward the heavens.

—Emily Stokes

## LOST AND FOUND DEPT. GLIMPSES LINCOLN



Abraham Lincoln, as every school kid used to know, back when his birthday was hived off as a holiday of its own, passed through New York seven times, but only three of those visits were truly memorable. There was the most famous one, in 1860, when he delivered the address at Cooper Union that made him a plausible Presidential candidate. Then, there was April, 1865, when his body was brought through on the funeral train taking him home.

Less seemingly momentous was a middle visit, in February of 1861, when the President-elect made a slow train trip east, on his way from Springfield to Wash-

ington, and stopped in New York for two days. Walt Whitman saw him then, outside the Astor House, on Broadway, and noted “his perfect composure and coolness—his unusual and uncouth height, his dress of complete black, stovepipe hat push’d back on the head.” New York was a hotbed of anti-Lincoln (and, conjointly, anti-black) sentiment, and so Whitman, musing on the crowd around Lincoln, speculates, “Many an assassin’s knife and pistol lurk’d in hip or breast-pocket there, ready, soon as break and riot came.”

On Lincoln’s first visit, in 1860, he stopped to have his picture, now indelible, taken by the photographer Mathew Brady. Less well known is that, on his 1861 trip, the other great New York image-maker of the time, the cartoonist Thomas Nast, saw him, too—for the first time—and made a series of drawings that are startling in their intimacy and alert observational power. The series has been known by scholarly rumor, but recently, tucked among the sketches in a Civil War notebook, two small images that Nast made of Lincoln’s face have been uncovered for the first time. This discovery we owe to the historian Ted Widmer, who came upon them in the archives of Brown University.

“I’ve been working on a book about that train trip from Springfield to Washington,” Widmer, who worked as a speechwriter in the Clinton White House, explained the other morning. “Presidents had never been as exciting to people before as Lincoln was at this moment. He was performing his part—the part of the

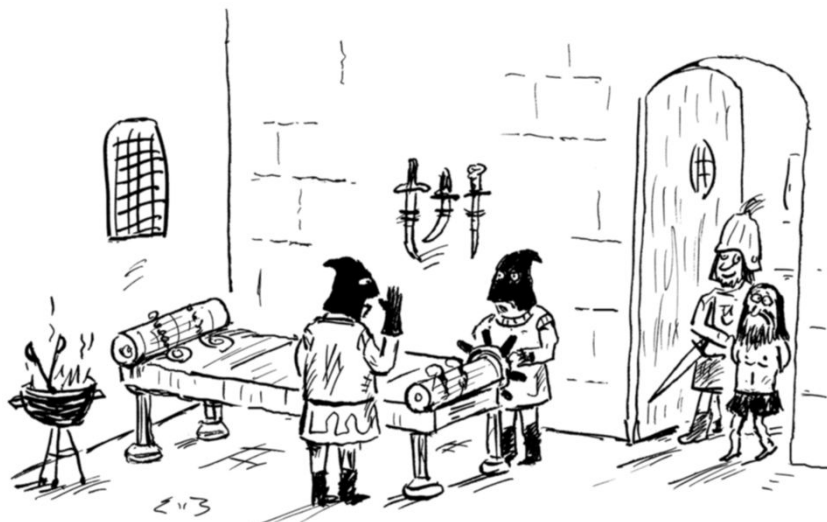
President-to-be, and even the part of the savior of his country. He started off with a couple of so-so speeches, but he got his game going and was giving great speeches by the time he got to New York.”

Searching for material at Brown—which has an exceptional Lincoln archive, including the collection of John Hay, Lincoln’s secretary—Widmer came upon a Civil War notebook with sketches in it ascribed to Nast. Turning the pages, he found a series showing Lincoln arriving at 30th Street train station, the precursor to New York’s Penn Station. Nast, only twenty, was already drawing regularly for *Harper’s Weekly* and other papers (although his first cartoon of Santa Claus, whose now iconic shape and beard were largely Nast’s invention, was about a year off).

“Nast was waiting in the train station in New York. He made all these drawings of the big crowd waiting for the train—and then you see Lincoln in his top hat, coming through! And in the middle were the two unknown sketches that I went crazy about: one is a pretty good side view—Nast got up close to Lincoln. There was another piece of paper Scotch Taped to the back of the page, and I was overcome with curiosity and looked on the back side, and there it was, this incredible frontal sketch of Lincoln’s face. Sixty seconds of looking, I suppose, but so strong.”

One of the striking things about the drawings is the exceptionally free and vivid shorthand with which they’re done, and the informality of their approach. Nast was still working largely in a finished, ceremonial vein common to cartoonists of the period. Most of the images he went on to draw of Lincoln were of that kind; one, an allegorical vision of a “false peace” between North and South, was widely credited with helping Lincoln get reelected. But, in these 1861 sketches, we see Nast’s mastery of the living thing, the face seized from life, which gives tensile strength to his more elaborate tableaux.

The other striking aspect of the sketches is the beard, which Lincoln had grown a year earlier. “The beard is endlessly fascinating,” Widmer said. “It’s true that a young girl did write to Lincoln suggesting that he grow one—that’s the old story. But the historian Adam Goodheart has a theory that the beard was a kind of rebellion against the crappiness of the compromising politicians of the



SIPRESS

“Don’t forget to call it a ‘procedure’—makes it less scary.”

preceding period, Buchanan and the rest, which was exemplified in the starchy way they dressed—a professional way of looking. Lincoln wanted to look Western, with a soft collar and a beard. Almost like Whitman—forging his own identity. I also have a theory that he may have been inspired by the great Hungarian liberal leader Lajos Kossuth, whom he keenly admired.”

Widmer has returned to the sketches often. “He looks so strong in these drawings—like a real force of nature, coming at the darkest moment to save the country, and even global democracy. With all its imperfections, the United States was still the largest democracy. If *we* didn’t make it, democracy didn’t. That was his point. And you see its outer surface here.”

—Adam Gopnik

## SIDEKICK DEPT. OLD SHOE



Much has been made of the announcement by Daniel Day-Lewis, last summer, that “Phantom Thread,” Paul Thomas Anderson’s psychological/sartorial drama, set in nineteen-fifties London, marks his retirement from acting. Less has been made—indeed, it would be fair to say that almost nothing has been made—of the fact that “Phantom Thread” also marks the cinematic debut of George Glasgow, a bespoke shoemaker and nascent character actor.

Viewers of the film who have managed to tear their eyes away from Day-Lewis—he has won three Academy Awards for Best Actor, and is nominated again, for his performance as Reynolds Woodcock, a fastidious couturier—may have noticed Glasgow, who appears in two scenes in his role as Nigel Cheddar-Goode. In the first, he is seated in a brasserie, bow-tied and mustachioed, dining with Day-Lewis and his co-stars (Vicky Krieps, who plays Woodcock’s muse, Alma, and Lesley Manville, who plays his sister, Cyril) and muttering about horse racing in a distinctive London accent. The second time, he appears as the best man at the wedding of Woodcock and Alma, standing silently in the back-

ground as they take their fateful vows.

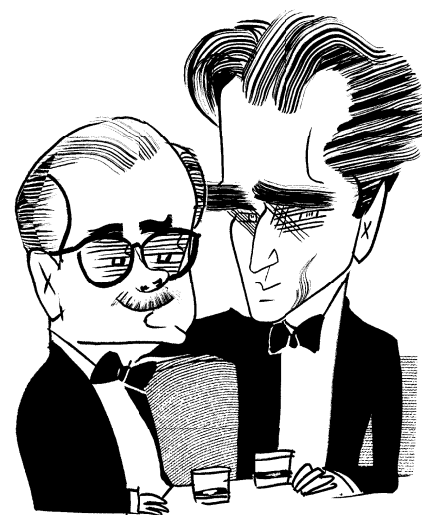
In his day job, Glasgow, who is sixty-six, is the co-owner of George Cleverley & Company, which crafts handmade shoes for bankers, hedge-funders, royals, sportsmen, and actors, including Day-Lewis. (Day-Lewis’s last—the beechwood form that is carved in the shape of his foot, upon which his shoes are made—dangles in a storeroom above the shop, in London, alongside the lasts of Charlie Watts, David Beckham, Jony Ive, and Kenneth Branagh.) A couple of years ago, when Glasgow was in New York to meet with clients, Day-Lewis invited him to lunch at Harry Cipriani, on Fifth Avenue. The men discussed the shoes that Day-Lewis was having made to wear as Woodcock—gorgeous, gleaming things, worn over socks of ecclesiastical purple—and Day-Lewis asked Glasgow about his life. The actor was delighted to hear that Glasgow was born in Pimlico: his own grandfather, Michael Balcon, was the head of the Ealing Studios, which made “Passport to Pimlico,” among many other celebrated film comedies.

“He said, ‘Can I ask you something?’, and I said, ‘Daniel. Honestly. You can ask me anything,’” Glasgow recalled recently, in his office above the shop, in the Royal Arcade, on Old Bond Street. “He said, ‘Do you want to be in this movie with me?’ There was a pause, and you are thinking, Is he on some kind of a substance? I said, ‘Daniel. Do you think I’m capable of standing in the same room as you? Because you’re great.’ He said, ‘George, I wouldn’t ask you if I didn’t think you were. Put your hand across the table if you’re in.’”

Glasgow spent a total of three days on the set. “People say to you, ‘You must have been well excited.’ But, believe you me, you are nervous, which I don’t normally get.” Before shooting the scene in the restaurant, Day-Lewis pulled him aside. “He says, ‘Right—you are my banker, you are my financial adviser, you are my friend, but you are a bit of a scallywag,’” Glasgow said. They did more than a dozen takes. Day-Lewis has said that he was overwhelmed with sadness while making the movie, and he seemed to want Glasgow there for levity’s sake. “We had a laugh and a joke and a giggle together,” Glasgow said. “The days can be long, and you want to have people around you that you can talk to and

maybe make life a little lighthearted.”

Woodcock is an obsessional perfectionist, traits that Glasgow shares to some extent, though he claims to have mellowed. This year marks for him a half century in the shoemaking business. In that time, the prices for his wares have risen from twenty pounds a pair to thirty-six hundred pounds, about five thousand dollars. The experience of wearing bespoke shoes rather than ready-made ones,



George Glasgow and Daniel Day-Lewis

he said, is comparable to squinting to compensate for farsightedness, then finally acquiescing to glasses: “You are, like, ‘Oh, God, what have I been missing?’”

Day-Lewis is well known for the immersive preparation that he undergoes for his roles—he made a couture dress for his wife, Rebecca Miller, before playing Woodcock—and also for his interest in crafts, including shoemaking, which he once spent about a year studying in Italy. He will now have more time to pursue such interests in retirement, if he wishes.

Glasgow is not certain whether he will take up the baton that Day-Lewis has put down, though he would certainly like to act again. “My business is a bit like theatre,” he said. “You adapt yourself to the client. If it’s the Duke of Bedford, you say, ‘Yes, m’lud, how are you, m’lud.’ I was brought up in that era where you are very subservient. But, with the wealth today, there are lots of people who have loads of money and they are, like, ‘Allo, mate, ow’s it goin’?’ And they are prepared to order a lot of shoes.”

—Rebecca Mead



A REPORTER AT LARGE

# THE ARMS DEALER

*How an N.R.A. lobbyist made Florida the testing ground for pro-gun policies.*

BY MIKE SPIES



Jared Moskowitz, a Democratic member of the Florida House of Representatives, was debating tax policy on the chamber floor, in Tallahassee, two weeks ago, when he received a call from his wife, Leah. He was surprised to hear her crying. She was trying to pick up their four-year-old son, Sam, who attends a preschool in Moskowitz's district, which encompasses two affluent communities about an hour north of Miami—Parkland and Coral Springs. Leah had seen a number of police officers outside the building. Moskowitz called the local sheriff's office and learned that the preschool was on lockdown, because there was an active shooter at the nearby Mar-

jory Stoneman Douglas High School.

Moskowitz, who graduated from Douglas in 1999, called Leah back, then walked over to Richard Corcoran, the speaker of the House, and explained that he had to leave. "I think people were still getting killed while we were talking," Moskowitz told me.

Parkland is almost five hundred miles south of Tallahassee; by the time Moskowitz's flight landed, he knew that nineteen-year-old Nikolas Cruz, who had been expelled from Douglas, had used a legally purchased AR-15 semiautomatic rifle to kill seventeen students and staff members and seriously wound more than a dozen others. Moskowitz drove

to the Marriott Hotel in Coral Springs, a few minutes from Douglas. Law-enforcement officials had directed parents and family members of missing children to a ballroom there.

Some mothers and fathers were praying; others grew exasperated. "Just tell me!" one parent yelled at the F.B.I. agents and the police officers who were in the room. "Is he in the school?" After midnight, officials began to take families to an adjoining room, one at a time, where they were told whether their child was dead or in the hospital. "You could hear them screaming through the wall," Moskowitz recalled.

Two days later, I joined Moskowitz on Coral Springs Drive, which runs alongside Douglas. The area was closed to traffic, and cordoned off by a length of police tape. TV-news reporters had camped out there, and Douglas students walked among them, placing flowers on an improvised memorial and demanding that lawmakers pass new gun-safety laws. One student, a solemn seventeen-year-old named Demitri Hoth, shared footage on his phone of his classmates just after the shooting. They were walking single file down Coral Springs Drive, with their hands over their heads. "I wanted to show the American public the true failure of our politicians," Hoth said. "We all lost something—our friends, our loved ones, our security, our innocence."

On the other side of the tape, public officials congregated. Normally, Moskowitz moves with the jumpy energy of a Hollywood agent, but now he was subdued. He wore a charcoal suit, and his hazel eyes were raw and red-rimmed. He had come from the funeral of Meadow Pollack, a senior at Douglas.

Moskowitz shook hands with Dan Daley, a young city commissioner in Coral Springs. "I was talking to one of the Douglas students," Daley said. "His only words to me were 'Do something.' I had to tell him that I legally can't do anything, because the governor could take away my job if I tried."

Moskowitz turned to me. "That's the legacy of Marion Hammer," he said.

Hammer is the National Rifle Association's Florida lobbyist. At seventy-eight years old, she is nearing four decades as the most influential gun lobbyist in the United States. Her policies have elevated

*In the past two decades, some thirty of Marion Hammer's bills have become law.*

Florida's gun owners to a uniquely privileged status, and made the public carrying of firearms a fact of daily life in the state. Daley was referring to a law that Hammer worked to enact in 2011, during Governor Rick Scott's first year in office. The statute punishes local officials who attempt to establish gun regulations stricter than those imposed at the state level. Officials can be fined thousands of dollars and removed from office.

Legal papers filed by the N.R.A. assert that the organization was "deeply involved in advocating" for the legislation. Hammer oversaw its development. When government policy analysts suggested even minor adjustments to the bill's language, they made sure to receive Hammer's approval. In an e-mail to Hammer about three draft amendments, an analyst wrote, "Marion, I've spoken with you about the first one," and went on to note that a different staffer "said she'd spoken with you about the others." The e-mail concluded, "Let me know what you think." The amendments addressed matters such as where fines should be deposited.

The sponsor of the bill was Matt Gaetz, at the time a twenty-eight-year-old Republican state representative. "That's the sequence of how each piece is done," Representative Dennis Baxley, a close ally of Hammer, told me. On bills that he sponsors, he said, "she works on it with the analyst. Then I look it over and file it. I'm not picky on the details." (Gaetz acknowledges that Hammer was a "significant contributor" to his bill but denies that she oversaw its drafting.)

Hammer is not an elected official, but she can create policy, see it through to passage, and use government resources to achieve her aims. These days, Florida's Republican-controlled legislature almost never allows any bill that appears to hinder gun owners to come up for a vote. According to Mac Stipanovich, a longtime Florida Republican strategist and lobbyist, Hammer is "in a class by herself. When you approach a certain level, where the legislator is basically a fig leaf, well, that's not the rule."

Hammer is less than five feet tall and wears her hair in a pageboy style. She carries a handgun in her purse, and, when she conducts business, she usually dresses in a red or teal blazer.

She once told an interviewer at the Orlando *Sentinel*, "If you came at me, and I felt that my life was in danger or that I was going to be injured, I wouldn't hesitate to shoot you."

Hammer works in Tallahassee, on a quiet downtown strip a few blocks from the capitol. Don Gaetz, Matt Gaetz's father, who was a Republican state senator between 2006 and 2016, said that Hammer rejects the upscale trappings of other lobbyists' offices. "There's no fancy reception area, leather-covered chairs, or brandy decanters," he said. "Just two or three rooms filled with paper, files, magazines, and a couple of older ladies clipping newspaper stories."

From this office, Hammer has shepherded laws into existence that have dramatically altered long-held American norms and legal principles. In the eighties, she crafted a statute that allows anyone who can legally purchase a firearm to carry a concealed handgun in public, as long as that person pays a small fee for a state-issued permit and completes a rudimentary training course. The law has been duplicated, in some form, in almost every state, and more than sixteen million Americans now have licenses to carry a concealed handgun.

In the early two-thousands, Hammer created the country's first Stand Your Ground self-defense law, authorizing the use of lethal force in response to a perceived threat. Some two dozen states have adopted a version of Stand Your Ground, giving concealed-carry permit holders wide discretion over when they can shoot another person.

In a recent book, "Engines of Liberty," David Cole, the national legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union, devoted an admiring chapter to Hammer and the N.R.A. As recently as 1988, Cole notes, a federal court maintained that "for at least 100 years [courts] have analyzed the second amendment purely in terms of protecting state militias, rather than individual rights." The subsequent shift toward individual rights can be traced back to Hammer. "Florida is often the first place the N.R.A. pursues specific gun rights protections," Cole explains, "relying on Hammer and her supporters to set a precedent that can then be exported to other states."

This strategy is far more effective than trying to overhaul federal laws, a

complicated process that draws the scrutiny of the national media. Since 1998, Republicans have had total control over Florida's legislature. In that time, the state has enacted some thirty of Hammer's bills. "Democrats don't have anything close to combat her," Moskowitz told me. In the executive and legislative branches, Republicans have been eager to work with her. Steve Crisafulli, a Republican who, between 2014 and 2016, served as the House speaker, said, "Members will go to Marion. They'll say, 'I want to carry a bill for the N.R.A. this year. What are you working on? What are your priorities?'"

Moskowitz hoped that the shooting at Douglas might be a turning point. During an interview with CNN, Governor Scott, a Republican who has never taken a position contrary to that of the N.R.A., said, "Everything's on the table." Still, Moskowitz was keeping his expectations within reason. "They're not going to ban assault weapons," he said. "But I have to bring these parents something. I have to show them we didn't ignore what happened." Survivors of the shooting, along with thousands of other protesters, have travelled to Tallahassee to urge the Governor and other elected officials to pass gun-control legislation. At a town hall convened by CNN, Senator Marco Rubio, who has received a grade of A-plus from the N.R.A., refused to stop accepting donations from the organization. He was loudly jeered. Some lawmakers questioned whether Florida was beginning to change, and if Hammer's dominance might be threatened.

According to court documents filed by the N.R.A. in 2016, the group has roughly three hundred thousand members in Florida. They are a politically active voting bloc with whom Hammer frequently communicates through e-mail. Using supercharged, provocative language, she keeps her followers apprised of who has been "loyal" to the Second Amendment and who has committed unforgivable "betrayals." "If you're with Marion ninety-five per cent of the time, you're a damn traitor," Matt Gaetz said.

Gaetz said that one of her e-mails "packs more political punch than a hundred thousand TV buys from any other



special interest in the state.” Hammer demonstrates a keen understanding of group identity. She and her followers are defending a way of life that is under threat. When a public official breaks ranks, Hammer exposes his “treacherous actions” and “traitorous nature.” She then invites her supporters to contact the official. “Tell him how you feel,” she advises. “PLEASE DO IT TODAY—time is short!!!”

Greg Evers, a former Republican state senator who, before he died, last August, worked closely with Hammer, estimated that her e-mails reach “two or three million” people. Florida has issued around 1.8 million concealed-carry permits, by far the most in the country, and there are 4.6 million registered Republican voters in the state. “The number of fanatical supporters who will take her word for anything and can be deployed almost at will is unique,” Stipanovich, the strategist and lobbyist, told me. For many Republicans, her support tends to be perceived as the difference between winning and losing.

Governor Scott is in the final year of his second term, and is expected to run for the Senate in November. Polls have him in a virtual tie with the Democratic incumbent, Bill Nelson. In order to win, Scott will need ample monetary and grassroots support from the N.R.A. In October, 2014, he trailed in the polls for his reelection, running behind the former governor Charlie Crist. According to a Web site with connections to the governor’s office, Hammer steered two million dollars toward the contest. The organization helped in less public ways as well. Curt Anderson, Scott’s chief political strategist, runs a consulting firm that exclusively services the N.R.A.; in the past two election cycles, campaign-finance records show, the N.R.A. paid Anderson’s company more than thirty-five million dollars to produce ads in support of Republican candidates. Scott eventually won reelection by a single percentage point.

“If you’re the governor, and you’ve won by a handful of votes, and you’ve got great political ambitions, you’re going to take Marion’s call in the middle of the night,” Don Gaetz said. “And, if she needs something, you do it, and

if you don’t think you can do it you try anyway.”

In the course of a year, in addition to interviewing dozens of Hammer’s allies and opponents, I obtained, through public-records requests, thousands of pages of e-mail correspondence and other documents that detail her relationships with officials in the highest levels of the state’s government. The breadth of Hammer’s power in Florida can be seen in the ways that state employees, legislators, and the governor defer to her—she gives orders, and they follow them. (Hammer refused to be interviewed for this story, but in response to queries she stated that “facts are being misrepresented and false stuff is being presented as fact.”)

“Elected officials have allowed her to own the process,” Ben Wilcox, the research director of Integrity Florida, a nonpartisan watchdog group, said after reviewing the documents. “It’s an egregious example of the influence that a lobbyist can wield.”

When Marion Hammer was five years old, her father was killed in Okinawa, while fighting in the Second World War. Her mother sent her to live on her grandparents’ farm, in South Carolina, where she milked cows and fed the other animals. Within a year, Hammer’s grandfather decided that she was old enough to shoot a gun. He set up a tomato can on a fencepost about twenty-five feet away and then handed her a .22-calibre rifle. Hammer has said that she hit the can on her first try.

According to the Miami *Herald*, Hammer attended college for a year but dropped out after she met a man she later married. After he got out of the Coast Guard, they moved to Gainesville, where they had three daughters. Her husband got a degree in building construction, and for a while the family bounced around the country, following jobs to Atlanta and Chicago, among other cities. Hammer became a life member of the N.R.A. in 1968, and the family settled in Tallahassee in the mid-seventies.

In 1974, Florida lawmakers introduced a bill that sought to ban the possession of black powder, which is used in muzzle-loading firearms. Hammer joined a local N.R.A. volunteer in his successful fight against the legislation.

The campaign occurred just before the launch of the Institute for Legislative Action, the N.R.A.’s lobbying arm, which transformed the organization from one primarily concerned with sporting and hunting into one that advocated for gun rights. In 1978, Hammer became the executive director of the Unified Sportsmen of Florida, and the N.R.A.’s top lobbyist in the state. Robert Baer, a former N.R.A. board member, compared her tactics to those of Lyndon Johnson. “She’s the same sort of operator,” he said. “She was a pro at political infighting—she understood how to get power.”

In the eighties, Hammer began to tell a story that she would repeat frequently in the years to come. One night, after leaving her office, she walked into a parking garage, where she was trailed by a carload of men. “They were yelling some of the most disgusting things you can imagine,” Hammer told the *Houston Chronicle*. “One man had a long-necked beer bottle, and he told me what he was going to do with it.” In those days, Hammer carried a Colt Detective Special six-shot revolver. “I pulled the gun out, brought it slowly up into the headlights of the car so they could see it, and I heard one of them scream, ‘The bitch got a gun!’” She added, “I could have been killed or raped, but I had a gun so I wasn’t. If the government takes away my gun, what’s going to happen to me next time?”

N.R.A. members elected Hammer to the organization’s board of directors in 1982. Five years later, Florida enacted her pioneering concealed-carry law, turning Hammer into a gun-rights star. In the early nineties, the board made her vice-president, and, between 1995 and 1998, Hammer served as the N.R.A.’s president, the first woman to head the organization. According to a former colleague at the Institute for Legislative Action, Hammer, who still sits on the N.R.A.’s board, has a “direct line” to Wayne LaPierre, the organization’s firebrand C.E.O. “Marion could do anything she wanted, and whatever she wanted she got,” the former colleague told me. “She would more or less single-handedly make legislation and push it.” In 2016, the N.R.A. paid Hammer two hundred and six thousand dollars, on top of the

hundred and ten thousand dollars she earned from the Unified Sportsmen of Florida.

In Florida, when a gun-rights measure is introduced, it is often Hammer, and not a lawmaker, who negotiates with committee policy chiefs, the staffers who guide legislation through the House and the Senate. Chiefs assess whether the language of a bill is constitutional, and how it might affect the state economy. If there is a problem with the text, chiefs will judge whether it can be remedied, and they are supposed to work with lawmakers to make necessary adjustments. Chiefs are the right hand of committee chairs, helping to decide which bills are brought up for a vote and allowed to progress to the floor.

Katie Cunningham was the policy chief of the House Criminal Justice Subcommittee during Governor Scott's first term in office, and she spoke with Hammer often. When Cunningham discussed revisions to gun legislation with other government staffers, she would send e-mails that said things like "Would you like to call Marion and let her know you've got another change to her bill?"

Other lobbyists communicate with staffers, too. But Hammer consistently has the most powerful voice in the room. In 2012, the subcommittee received a bill establishing that a concealed-carry permit does not allow a person to bring a gun into a range of government buildings or a childcare center. Within days, Hammer had sent an e-mail to Cunningham, informing her that the "N.R.A. is opposed" to the bill. She continued, "Hope that it will not even be heard." The legislation was left off the voting calendar, and died two months later.

In March, 2011, shortly after Scott took office, Hammer e-mailed Cunningham about a bill called the Firearm Owners' Privacy Act, one of Hammer's top legislative priorities for the year. Later dubbed Docs vs. Glocks, it prohibited doctors from asking patients if they owned guns. The question is one that some physicians pose, especially to parents of small children, when assessing potential health hazards. On an N.R.A. talk show, Hammer said that doctors were "carrying out a gun-ban campaign."

Hammer reprimanded Cunningham for making a change to the legislation. "We NEED the bill to continue to say that asking the question is a violation of privacy rights," Hammer wrote. "You are changing the whole thrust of the bill by gratuitously removing language that is important to purpose of the bill. Please, put the first section back as it was and amend it as I suggested." Hammer did not copy any lawmakers on the e-mail—not even the chair of the subcommittee or the bill's lead sponsor, Representative Jason Brodeur, a thirty-five-year-old Republican in his first term.

Cunningham was contrite. "Believe me—I had no intent to change the thrust of anything," she replied, adding, "See attached and let me know if that'll work."

Ray Pilon was one of the Republicans on the Criminal Justice Subcommittee. He called the interactions between Hammer and Cunningham "improper." (Cunningham could not be reached for comment.) "I had no idea they were working together," he told me.

"When we discuss a bill in committee, what the staffer says to members—what Katie would have said—winds up looking like a recommendation. In a vote, the analysis weighs heavily."

Within weeks, the bill had cleared the subcommittee and the legislature and was headed to the desk of Governor Scott. On May 1st, Hammer prepared to celebrate. She e-mailed Diane Moulton, the director of Scott's executive staff. "Please ask Governor Scott if we can have bill signing ceremonies for the following bills with the invitees listed," Hammer wrote.

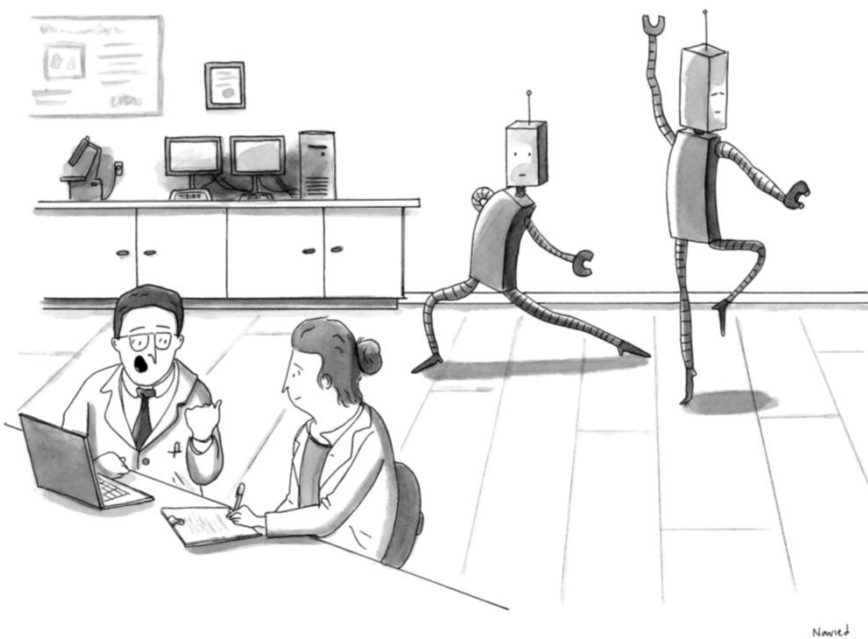
The next day, Hammer sent a follow-up e-mail about the event. "Please remember that since we use these photos in N.R.A.'s magazines, only the best quality photo can be used," she wrote. "That's why we ALWAYS request E.T."—a local photographer named Eric Tourney.

Tourney was hired. In photographs from the event, Hammer, dressed in one of her signature blazers, stands over Scott's right shoulder as he signs her



*"I just hope one day I'll be able to trust again."*





*"They don't appear to want to take over. They just want to dance."*

bill into law. Since then, at least ten states have introduced their own version of Hammer's Docs legislation. In 2017, a federal court ruled Florida's law unconstitutional.

Stand Your Ground was introduced in the Florida legislature in December, 2004. Though no one realized it at the time, it would become the N.R.A.'s most controversial law. "Marion was the ringmaster," Dan Gelber, who later served as the House Democratic minority leader, said. "It was her circus. She was telling everyone where to go and what hoops to jump through." Before Stand Your Ground, Americans were forbidden to use force in potentially dangerous public situations if they had the option of fleeing. The new law removed any duty to retreat, justifying force so long as a shooter "reasonably" believed that physical harm was imminent. It was a radical break with legal tradition. Now a person's subjective feelings of fear were grounds to shoot someone even if there were other options available.

The statute was supposed to be a bulwark against overzealous state attorneys, but Hammer and the Republican sponsors of Stand Your Ground could not point to a single instance in which a person had been wrongfully charged, tried,

or convicted after invoking Florida's traditional self-defense law. "There was no problem," Mary Anne Franks, a law professor at the University of Miami, who has extensively studied Stand Your Ground, said. "There wasn't a terrible epidemic of people getting prosecuted or harassed."

Gelber said, "There were Republicans who, throughout the process, were expressing reservations to me about the bill. But their entire rationalization was that the legislation won't have any impact, so we might as well just please the N.R.A."

In April, 2005, Stand Your Ground passed easily; only twenty lawmakers voted against it, all of them House Democrats. Later that month, Jeb Bush, then the governor of Florida, signed Hammer's proposal into law. He called the bill "common sense."

On February 26, 2012, in Sanford, Florida, George Zimmerman, a twenty-eight-year-old neighborhood-watch volunteer, confronted Trayvon Martin, an unarmed black seventeen-year-old. After a scuffle, Zimmerman, who had a concealed-carry permit, pulled out a 9-millimetre pistol and fatally shot Martin. In April, after Governor Scott appointed a special prosecutor, Zimmerman was charged in Martin's death.

Scott faced public pressure to reevaluate Stand Your Ground, and two months later he unveiled the Task Force on Citizen Safety and Protection, which would hold public hearings across the state and publish an analysis of its findings. Its nineteen members included Dennis Baxley, the Hammer ally, who was one of Stand Your Ground's primary sponsors, and four other legislators who had voted in favor of the law, including Jason Brodeur, who sponsored the Docs bill.

During the first week of June, just before public hearings got under way, the Tampa Bay Times published the results of its own investigation into Stand Your Ground. The paper found that, since the law had taken effect, nearly seventy per cent of those who invoked it as a defense had gone free. There was a racial imbalance: a person was more likely to be found innocent if the victim was black. Four days later, Hammer e-mailed John Konkus, the chief of staff for Lieutenant Governor Jennifer Carroll, who was the chair of the task force. Hammer sent him contact information for seven pro-gun academics who she thought would make good expert witnesses. (She says she did this at his request.) She pointed out that two of the professors "are black." Governor Scott's office told me that it "took input from a variety of stakeholders" when selecting witnesses.

Though none of the people whom Hammer suggested appeared before the task force, Konkus did invite her to make a presentation of her own. On October 16th, in Jacksonville, Hammer delivered a long, vigorous defense of Stand Your Ground. She claimed that, before the law was enacted, innocent people were "being arrested, prosecuted, and punished for exercising self-defense that was lawful under the Constitution and Florida law." Later, Hammer addressed the statute's critics. "There have been claims that some guilty people have or may go free because of the law," she said. "That may be an unintended consequence of the law, but history accepts that fault."

In an e-mail, I asked Hammer if she could provide examples of people who had been wrongfully dragged through the legal system before Stand Your Ground. "Not relevant," she responded. "And no." Still, Hammer maintains that "there was a list of victims of overzealous prosecutors."

In February, 2013, the task force released its report. It made some minor suggestions for improving Stand Your Ground, but it unequivocally reaffirmed the statute's core principle: "All persons who are conducting themselves in a lawful manner have a fundamental right to stand their ground and defend themselves from attack with proportionate force in every place they have a lawful right to be."

Matt Gaetz told me that the task force "was largely window dressing. It was just an open-mike night for people's views relating to gun laws." Less than five months after the report was published, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of second-degree murder and manslaughter.

Governor Scott's office maintains that it regards Marion Hammer no differently from any other lobbyist or citizen in Florida. "Every governor's office in the country hears from stakeholders and advocates on issues," Lauren Schenone, Scott's press secretary, told me.

But the efforts to satisfy Hammer's demands can be seriously disruptive to the business of government. In 2014, when Scott was running for reelection, Hammer was pushing a bill that would allow people without permits to carry concealed handguns during a mandatory evacuation. On the morning of March 19th, Captain Terrence Gorman, the general counsel for the Florida Department of Military Affairs (D.M.A.), testified at a Senate committee hearing about the legislation. Like everyone who speaks at a hearing, Gorman was required to fill out an appearance card. His said that he was there to provide "information"—neutral input—as opposed to lobbying for or against the legislation. "We are first responders to a lot of emergency-management situations," Gorman explained to committee members early in his testimony.

Gorman was thirty-eight, a Bronze Star-winning combat veteran who had served multiple tours in Afghanistan. Throughout his career, he had received glowing performance reviews. Gorman testified that Hammer's bill conflicted with "existing law." He said that gun owners without concealed-carry permits would likely be ignorant of the state's self-defense statutes; they wouldn't know

when they could and could not fire their weapons. And he asked the legislators to "weigh out the public-safety concerns for military and police as they respond and as they have to engage people in a somewhat chaotic environment." After Gorman concluded his testimony, Senator Evers, the most pro-gun lawmaker on the committee, told his colleagues, "I think he did a wonderful job."

Hammer did not. In the gallery, she turned to Mike Prendergast, the head of the Department of Veterans Affairs, who she incorrectly assumed was Gorman's supervisor. "You're on my shit list," she said.

In Florida, the D.M.A. falls under the aegis of the governor's office. A few hours after the hearing, Hammer e-mailed Pete Antonacci, Scott's general counsel. She wrote that Gorman had lied on his appearance card and was "clearly there to kill" the legislation. She demanded to know "who, specifically, asked him to lobby against the bill," and what was "being done to undo the harm he has caused with his actions."

Later that day, Hammer met with Antonacci and Adam Hollingsworth, Scott's chief of staff. "Because it was an election year, there was heightened sensitivity in the office," a former administration staffer said. "The campaign team wanted this resolved as soon as possible."

On March 20th, Antonacci informed Hammer that the Governor's director of legislative affairs had been "dispatched



to Senate to express Scott administration support for the bill."

The governor's office had also directed Emmett Titshaw, then Florida's adjutant general, to write a letter to Thad Altman, the chair of the Senate committee that oversaw the D.M.A. The letter was terse. "Captain Terrence Gorman is not authorized to speak for the Department of Military Affairs on legislative issues," it said. "Department of Military Affairs supports Senate Bill 296,"

a reference to the numeric title of Hammer's legislation.

Titshaw, who was on vacation with his family in British Columbia, notified a staffer that he had "approved" the letter's language but was still "trying to [find] out why CPT Gorman appeared before the committee."

Hammer was unhappy with Titshaw's letter. In an e-mail to Diane Moulton, Scott's executive staff director, and Melinda Miguel, his chief inspector general, she called it "woefully inadequate," adding, "I do not accept this as part of the remedy to the damage done by Capt. Gorman." Hammer wanted the letter to go further, and "apologize for any misrepresentations or inconvenience."

"There weren't negotiations going back and forth," the former Scott staffer said. "It was one-sided. It was Marion saying, 'Here's what I want you to do to fix this problem. You're going to do this, this, and this, and if you don't do any of these things it's going to be an issue.'" The staffer went on, "It speaks to the worst of the process—it's not what you know, it's who you know."

On March 23rd, Hammer sent Titshaw's letter to her followers. The subject line announced that the e-mail contained a letter from Florida's adjutant general in "support" of the bill.

But the process of atonement was not yet complete. The bill was referred to the House Judiciary Committee. On March 24th, after Titshaw returned early from his vacation, he sent a letter to the committee's chair, Dennis Baxley. "Every member of the Florida National Guard takes an oath of allegiance to the Constitutions of the United States and the State of Florida to defend the constitutional rights of our citizens," it said, before stating that the D.M.A. "supports" Hammer's legislation.

E-mails show that Hammer wanted Gorman fired. ("When rogue staffers deceive legislators, they should be fired," she told me.) According to a former D.M.A. official, Titshaw had a meeting in Tallahassee with Hollingsworth and Antonacci. The official said that the two Scott administrators pushed Titshaw to remove the captain from his position. They delivered the instruction "without the input of the Governor," the official said, "in order to keep the Governor's hands clean." Hollingsworth told Titshaw that



“a head has to roll” and that Gorman had done “irreparable damage,” the official recalled. Titshaw said that he would resign rather than carry out such an order. Hollingsworth backed off, the official said, but Antonacci kept “pressing the issue.”

Hollingsworth did not reply to a request for comment for this story. Antonacci told me, “I didn’t ask that Captain Gorman be fired. That’s my recollection.” But, he said, Gorman “did not have permission from his chain of command” to testify.

Antonacci’s statement is contradicted by an internal D.M.A. memo, written by Gorman. According to the document, Glenn Sutphin, then serving as the director of the D.M.A.’s legislative-affairs office, had planned to represent the agency at the Senate committee meeting. The day before the hearing, he asked Gorman to analyze Hammer’s bill, flag any issues that he found, and report back to him.

The morning of the hearing, Sutphin determined that, owing to a scheduling conflict, he would not be able to attend the Senate meeting. “It’s standard operating procedure for the D.M.A. to attend all military subcommittees in the House and Senate,” he told me recently. “Since I was gone, I asked Gorman to attend the meeting. That’s it.”

The governor’s office told me that it was not influenced by Hammer or by Scott’s election campaign. But the former Scott staffer said, “This incident will go down as the worst I’ve ever witnessed by way of government. This is how important the N.R.A. is in an election year for statewide office. The administration got prostituted to keep Marion Hammer happy.” Six months later, the Governor signed into law the bill allowing people without permits to carry concealed weapons during emergencies.

Unlike elected officials, who are limited to eight years in office, Hammer takes a long view of the legislative process. In the past few years, the Senate Judiciary Committee has been a persistent nuisance to her. Several of its legislators are Republicans from Miami, where an N.R.A. endorsement does not mean much, and may even harm a candidate. These lawmakers have blocked legislation that would sanction the open carrying of firearms in public and require

state universities and colleges to allow guns on campus. Hammer sees such developments as temporary setbacks. “Eventually, everything passes,” she has said. “That’s why, when folks keep asking, ‘What if these bills don’t pass?’ Well, they’ll be back. If we file a bill, it will be back and back and back until it passes.”

Oscar Braynon, the Democratic minority leader in the Florida Senate, said, “Marion’s just waiting us out. When the committees change, she’ll be there to pass that bill.”

Hammer often shepherds legislation over several sessions. In the summer of 2015, the Florida Supreme Court addressed one of Stand Your Ground’s core provisions, which provides a path to immunity from the legal proceedings that typically follow a charge of murder or assault. Under the law, a defendant is entitled to a special pretrial hearing, during which a judge can dismiss the case. The court ruled that in these hearings the burden of proof was on the person claiming the statute’s protections. To shift the onus in the other direction, the court said, would essentially require prosecutors to prove a case twice.

Later that year, Hammer began to push a bill that would place the burden on the state, making Stand Your Ground defenses nearly impregnable. In September, the legislation was referred to the House Criminal Justice Subcommittee, where Representative Dave Kerner, a Democrat, proposed two amendments that would gut the bill. Hammer knew that the committee’s chair, Representative Carlos Trujillo, a Miami Republican, was against the measure; he felt that it would make the jobs of prosecutors excessively difficult. When the committee voted on the amendments, two Republicans were missing. Hammer believes that Trujillo had sent them out of the room to insure that the amendments would pass. She e-mailed her network to share her theory. “It is important to recognize and remember the committee members who were loyal to the Constitution and your right to self-defense—as well as it is the betrayers,” Hammer wrote.

One of the absent lawmakers was Ray Pilon, who was in his third term in the House. During his previous reelection campaign, in 2014, he had received the N.R.A.’s endorsement and a grade of

A-plus. He supported Hammer’s Stand Your Ground expansion but missed the vote on Kerner’s amendments because he had to attend a different committee meeting, where a health-care-related bill that he was sponsoring was coming up for a vote. According to Ben Wilcox, the Florida ethics watchdog, it would have been “really strange” for Pilon not to present his bill. “That’s part of the essential work of government that has to get done,” Wilcox said. “It’s standard.” Pilon tried to explain the situation to Hammer, but she wouldn’t hear it. “Marion crucified me,” he told me. “I said I would have voted against the amendments, but she didn’t believe me. She called me a liar. She said I did it on purpose, and that I had a choice. But I didn’t, unless I wanted to let my own bill go down in flames.”

That winter, Hammer revived the enhanced Stand Your Ground legislation. The bill cleared the Senate and went back to the House, where it was assigned to the Judiciary Committee. The chair was Representative Charles McBurney, a Republican, who had been a loyal ally to Hammer and, like Pilon, had received an A-plus during his most recent reelection campaign. A lawyer by trade, he had reservations about the bill. In November, two months before the bill was resurrected in the Senate, Hammer had written to him that she was “distressed” to hear that he’d been working to undermine her efforts. McBurney told Hammer that the “rumors are untrue,” and that, while he had “concerns about aspects of that bill,” he had “too much respect” for her not to discuss them with her. But, in late February, 2016, with the bill back in the House, McBurney told the press that he did not plan to call it up for a vote. “I was concerned about the policy,” he explained to reporters, and thought it best to press “the pause button.”

McBurney, who was in his final term, was seeking an appointment to a circuit-court judgeship in the Jacksonville area. In the spring, just a few months after McBurney killed Hammer’s bill, a nominating commission placed him on a list of six finalists for the job. The list was forwarded to Governor Scott, who would decide which candidate should fill the vacancy. Shortly thereafter, Hammer warned her supporters that McBurney had “proved himself to be summarily

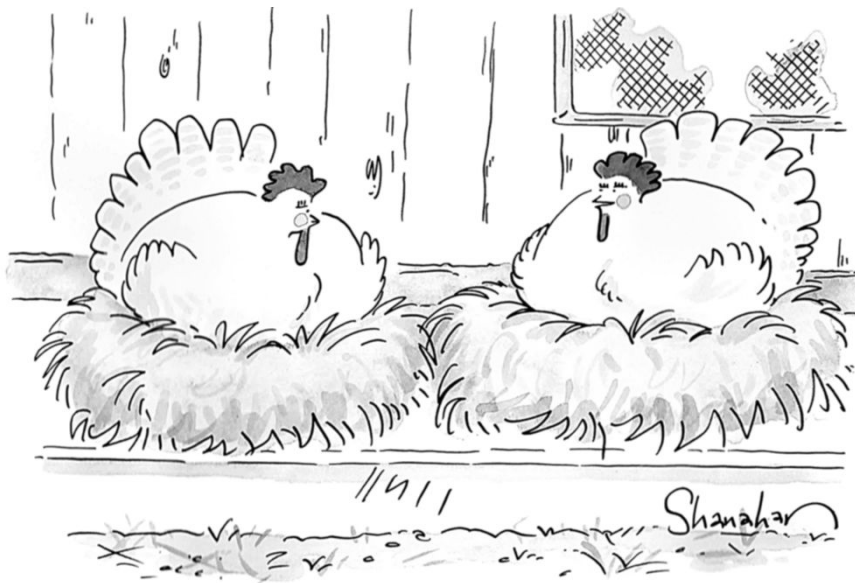
unfit to serve on the bench of any Court anywhere.” She accused him of trying to “gain favor with prosecutors,” and claimed that he “traded your rights for his own personal gain.” Hammer ended her missive with a set of directions. “E-mail Governor Rick Scott RIGHT AWAY,” she wrote. “Tell him PLEASE DO NOT APPOINT Charles McBurney to a judgeship.”

Thousands of people complied with Hammer’s request, and, in early summer, Scott gave the job to one of the other candidates. (Scott’s office told me that he appointed the best candidate: “Any inference that he was influenced is false.”) Don Gaetz told me, “When Marion launched her campaign to pay McBurney back, whatever chances he had for that judgeship melted immediately.”

Meanwhile, Pilon was engaged in a highly competitive primary for an open seat in the state Senate. Hammer dropped his grade to a C and supported one of his House colleagues, a young, ardently conservative Republican named Greg Steube. In August, Steube won the primary. “She sent out thousands of cards telling people to vote for him,” Pilon, who is now retired, said. “She did for him what she once did for me.”

In January, 2017, Hammer returned to the business of legislating. The new session would not begin until March, but her Stand Your Ground bill had already been refiled. She sent out blast texts and e-mails to Republican lawmakers, urging them to co-sponsor it. One legislator who received a text was Representative Randy Fine, a Republican in his first year of office. “OK,” he answered. “Let me read the bill and talk to Bobby”—Bobby Payne, the primary sponsor in the House. He went on, “I’ve barely been able to figure out how to file my first bill,” adding, “Haven’t cosponsored anything yet.” Eventually, he joined forty-six of his House colleagues in co-sponsoring the bill.

When the legislature reconvened, the Stand Your Ground bill passed, despite vehement objections from prosecutors across the state. In early June, Scott signed it into law. Last fall, a study published in *JAMA Internal Medicine* revealed that, in Stand Your Ground’s first decade, the number of homicides ruled legally justifiable had increased in Florida by seventy-five per cent. In one notable in-



*“And now we just relax, settle down, and smother them until they crack.”*

stance, two boat owners got into a fight and fell in the water; as one attempted to climb out, the other fatally shot him in the back of the head. A jury found the killer not guilty.

Mary Anne Franks, the law professor from the University of Miami, told me that the number of justifiable homicides is likely to continue to rise. “The new amendment makes it even easier for killers who provide zero evidence of self-defense to avoid not only being convicted but being prosecuted at all,” she said.

After Charles McBurney learned that he’d been passed over for the judgeship, he published an op-ed on Jacksonville.com, arguing that Hammer’s bill had nothing to do with gun rights, and decrying her tactics. “It’s the message being sent to our legislators and elected officials that ‘you can be with me on virtually everything, but if you cross me once, even if the issue doesn’t involve the Second Amendment, I will take you out,’” he wrote. “It’s frightening for our republic.”

In June, 2016, when a shooting occurred at the Pulse night club, in Orlando, in which forty-nine people were killed and another fifty-eight wounded, the Florida legislature was out of session. Using a long-shot procedural ma-

neuver, Democrats tried to convene a special session but were rebuffed by Republicans. At the time, Hammer told the Tallahassee *Democrat*, “I have not heard a single Republican say that they were interested in spending the taxpayer’s money for a special session that would achieve nothing but more publicity for Democrats.”

Months later, Representative Carlos Smith, a Democrat from East Orlando, introduced a bill that would have banned assault weapons. It never got a hearing. “The power of Marion Hammer dictated whether we could even have a conversation about what I was proposing,” he told me. “I lost constituents at Pulse. I lost a friend.”

This legislative session, he reintroduced the bill. On Tuesday, February 20th, as students from Douglas High School sat in the gallery, every House Republican voted against bringing the legislation to the floor. Smith said, “It was devastating to watch that happen, but the students aren’t kids anymore, and it’s important that we don’t shield them from harsh political realities.”

The next day, students and other protesters descended upon the capitol. They congregated outside the office of Governor Scott, chanting, “You work for us!” But Scott was not there. He was attending a funeral for a student. ♦

# DIRECT EYE CONTACT

*The most sophisticated, most urban, most reproductively fruitful of bears.*

BY JOHN MCPHEE

Fifty-five years ago, I built a house (that is, paid for the building of it) in the northwest corner of Princeton Township, in New Jersey. It was on an unpaved road, running through woods and past an abandoned cornfield that had become a small meadow. My house looks out through trees and down that meadow.

Improbably, I developed a yearning, almost from the get-go, to see a bear someday in the meadow. While I flossed in the morning, looking north through an upstairs bathroom window, I hoped to see a bear come out of the trees. If this seems quixotic, it was. This was four miles from the campus of Princeton University, around which on all sides was what New Yorkers were calling a bedroom community. Deer were present in large familial groups, as they still are in even larger families. They don't give a damn about much of anything, and when I walk down the driveway in the morning to pick up the newspaper I all but have to push them out of the way. Beforehand, of course, I have been upstairs flossing, looking down the meadow. No bears.

In 1966, in a conversation in Trenton with Lester MacNamara, the head of the state's Division of Fish and Game, I learned that there were twenty-two wild bears in New Jersey. Most lived on or near Kittatinny Mountain, in Sussex County, up the Delaware River. Sussex was once under a vertical kilometre of ice, and it looks it. It looks like Vermont. Kittatinny is actually a component of one very long mountain that runs, under various names, from Alabama to Newfoundland as the easternmost expression of the folded-

and-faulted, deformed Appalachians. Through Sussex County, it carries the Appalachian Trail. New Jersey bears are best off there, and they know they are best off there, but they are as curious as they are hungry, and they range widely looking for mates. MacNamara happened to learn, while I was with

ton. In Yardville, a cop shot and killed it. New Jersey's bear biologists would have preferred to get there first, shoot the bear with Ketaset, put it in a pickup after it conked out, and take it to Kittatinny before it woke up.

So please note: my ambition to see a bear in my back yard has not been completely insane. By the latest estimate, there are about twenty-five hundred bears in New Jersey now. Wild bears. Black bears. And perhaps not a few that have immigrated from Pennsylvania in search of a better life. In recent years, bears have been spotted in every New Jersey county.

Nassau Street is the main street of Princeton—town on one side, university on the other—and a bear has been seen there, close by the so-called “tree streets” (Chestnut, Walnut, Linden, Maple, Spruce, and Pine). I grew up on Maple Street. If I wanted to see a bear, I should have stayed put. Marshall Provost, a longtime friend of mine who recently left the Princeton police force to become a federal police officer in the District of Columbia, has told me that Princeton's official attitude toward bears is “Just leave them alone.” He nonetheless investigated the Tree Street Bear: “I walked within ten feet of it. It was leaning against a tree.” Of another bear, he said, “It was all over Princeton. That guy travelled.” As did still another bear last June 19th. Nick Sutter, the town's police chief, told me that it was seen at the Hun School and around Princeton's Ascot-class neighborhoods—Elm Road, Constitution Hill—and on Cham-

bers Street, in the middle of town. Princeton's benign and respectful disposition toward wild bears is not in any way unusual or special in this exemplary state, whose municipalities, counties, and state agencies come on in choral unison about what to do when bears show up in your back yard.

“Just let 'em go.”

“Just leave 'em alone.”

“Be cautious,” an online article about



*Bears have been spotted in every New Jersey county.*

him in his office, that a farmer in Pottersville had shot and killed a bear up a tree, and MacNamara, on his telephone, was shouting mad. Twenty-one.

Pottersville is in Hunterdon County, and Hunterdon is the county next to Mercer, and Mercer is where I am. In 1980, a bear came through Hunterdon and into Mercer, skirted Princeton, and somehow crossed U.S. 1 and I-195 within five miles of the center of Tren-



Lawrence Township (Mercer County) said. "A black bear was spotted Sunday on Surrey Drive." In Laurel Run Village, a development in Bordentown (Burlington County), a bear stood up six feet tall, looked around, and went off into the woodlot next door.

Essex, New Jersey's second-densest county, with a population per square mile that outdenses the Netherlands, has had a number of recent sightings of wild black bears. On Memorial Day weekend, 2016, in West Caldwell, a bear was seen "in the area of Herbert Place and Eastern Parkway," according to a piece by Eric Kiefer on the Web site Patch. The bear, or another bear, next played Verona, "on Crestmont Road in the area of Claremont Ave." This was fourteen miles from the editorial offices of *The New Yorker*, which look out across the Hudson, over the Meadowlands, and far into Essex County.

In May, 2017, in Middletown Township (Monmouth County), bears were sighted on Nut Swamp Road and, a day later, on Packard Drive. In Manchester Township (Ocean County), a wild black bear went up a back-yard tree in a neighborhood called Holly Oaks, where it tried to look like a black burl weighing two hundred and fifty pounds. According to a piece by Rob Spahr, of NJ Advance Media, "officers used sirens, air horns and water hoses to move the bear." The bear moved. Because it might return, police told residents, "Be vigilant." They also recommended that citizens review the bear-safety advice of, as it is called now, the state's Division of Fish and Wildlife, Department of Environmental Protection:

Never feed or approach a bear! Remain calm if you encounter a bear. Make the bear aware of your presence by speaking in an assertive voice, singing, clapping your hands, or making other noises. Make sure the bear has an escape route. If a bear enters your home, provide it with an escape route by propping all doors open. Avoid direct eye contact, which may be perceived by a bear as a challenge. Never run from a bear. Instead, slowly back away. To scare the bear away, make loud noises by yelling, banging on pans or using an air horn. Make yourself look as big as possible by waving your arms. If you are with someone else, stand close together with your arms raised above your head.

In the past three years, twenty-one bears have entered New Jersey homes, with no human fatalities. For example,



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'The London Review of Books  
is an entire culture'  
— Zadie Smith

Diane Eriksen, of West Milford (Passaic County), was under the impression that she was alone in her house. Hearing a sound in her living room, she went and had a look. A bear looked back. She beat a retreat and called 911. The bear, at the coffee table, helped itself to half a bowl of peppermint patties, scattered the wrappers all over the floor, and took off. The 911 call resulted in its death.

The state's advisory continues:

The bear may utter a series of huffs, make popping jaw sounds by snapping its jaws and swat the ground. These are warning signs that you are too close. Slowly back away, avoid direct eye contact and do not run. If a bear stands on its hind legs or moves closer, it may be trying to get a better view or detect scents in the air. It is usually not a threatening behavior. Black bears will sometimes "bluff charge" when cornered, threatened or attempting to steal food. Stand your ground, avoid direct eye contact, then slowly back away and do not run. If the bear does not leave, move to a secure area. Report black bear damage or nuisance behavior to the DEP's 24-hour, toll-free hotline at 1-877-WARN DEP (1-877-927-6337). Families who live in areas frequented by black bears should have a "Bear Plan" in place for children, with an escape route and planned use of whistles and air horns. Black bear attacks are extremely rare. If a black bear does attack, fight back.

To be sure, black bears are dangerous. Mistakenly described as "sedentary," even "harmless," they can be every bit as lethal as grizzlies. Years ago, a geologist I know lost both her arms to a black bear in Alaska's Yukon-Tanana terrain. In 2002, a bear in Sullivan County, New York, removed an infant from a stroller, carried her into the woods, and killed her. In 2014, a Rutgers student was killed by a bear in Passaic County, New Jersey. Horrible as such events are, bear stories gathering in the mind across time tend to exaggerate their own frequency. In the past twenty years, fourteen people in the United States have been killed by black bears. In 2012, one person killed twenty children in Connecticut. In 2018 ...

Police in the Borough of Middlesex (Middlesex County) posted a Nixle notification: "Be alert, secure garbage and NEVER feed or approach bears." Lawrence Township told Lawrentians to bring garbage cans and bird feeders inside. Bordentown police went on Facebook to face down bears.

Evidently, there are fewer bears to face down than there were a year ago. Statewide, reported bear sightings dropped from seven hundred and twenty-two in 2016 to two hundred and sixty-three in 2017. Why this is so is not definitively known. With increased hunting, the bears have surely become warier. They could also have seen enough and gone back to the Poconos. But New Jersey bears are, of course, almost all native, and they are reproductively more fruitful than the nine hundred thousand black bears elsewhere in North America, whose average number of cubs per birth is a bit above two. The New Jersey average is 2.9. New Jersey sows have dropped as many as six cubs in a litter, and five, and four. New Jersey bears have a more concentrated forage of acorns, hazelnuts, beechnuts, and so forth—foods that build fat. Fat equals health, and, in winter, nourishment for the mother making milk for her cubs, which are born in the den.

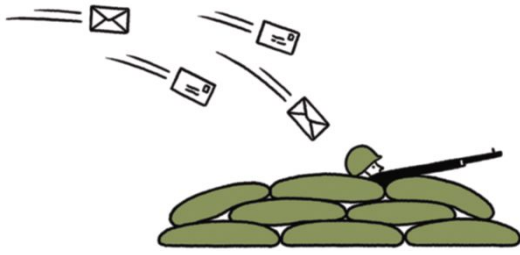
In 2003, New Jersey decided that its bear population had increased to a size that needed "management." Bear hunting, banned in 1971, was "reintroduced" and took place in early December, during deer season. In 2015, the bear-hunting season was greatly increased, with a new "segment," in October, when black bears are much more active, and the licensee was permitted to use a bow and arrow or a muzzleloader, the gun that fired the shot heard round the world. There are more muzzleloaders in the United States today than there were people in Colonial America in 1775. In the late twentieth century, a muzzleloader in California ignited a fire that burned three thousand eight hundred and sixty acres. If something like that were not enough to make a bear wary, New Jersey's overall "harvest" surely has been. In fifteen years, New Jersey hunters have killed four thousand bears. Among conjectures about the cause of the decline in bear sightings, that one seems prominent. The fact that New Jersey bears are crepuscular—that is, they move about before sunrise and after sunset, and spend the rest of the day in a swamp—has more to do with sheer intelligence than it does with nature. New Jersey's new governor, Phil Murphy

(Monmouth County), came into office declaring that he was going to ban the bear hunt once more.

In the past several decades, I have done most of my shad fishing on the Upper Delaware River in Wayne County, Pennsylvania, opposite Sullivan County, New York. Pennsylvania estimates its population of black bears at twenty thousand, and a lot of them are in Wayne County, where I have never seen one, but they are around us all the time. In a storm, a big oak in mast, up a slope from my cabin there, fell not long ago. Its trunk broke freakishly—about twenty feet up—and the crown bent all the way over and spread the upper branches like a broom upon the ground. In the branches were a number of thousands of acorns. The next morning, there was enough bear shit around that oak to fertilize the Philadelphia Flower Show. But nary a bear. A neighbor, though, went around a corner of his cabin one day and almost bumped into a bear coming the other way. The bear was so afraid of this neighbor that it turned, ran down the bank to the river, jumped in, and swam to New York. Black bears are strong swimmers.

My ambition to see one in my own back yard came extremely close to success on the eleventh of August, 2016. My wife, Yolanda Whitman, was sitting in the living room and happened to look up. A bear came out of the trees and started across the meadow. And where was I at this milestone of a moment? I was in a basement recording studio in a new building on the Princeton campus making a podcast about Princeton basketball with Mitch Henderson, the head coach.

My résumé remains empty. Looking down from our windows, I have never seen a bear. Mitch Henderson will have to do. Meanwhile, as Yolanda watched, the bear reached mid-meadow and sat down. This was not before sunrise or after sunset. This was late morning. This bear was not afraid of anything. Rolling its shoulders, flexing, shrugging, soaking up the sun, it groomed itself. It sat there and groomed itself (!!!), while I, talking to Mitch, was in a cellar designed by Frank Gehry, and Yolanda, whose mind is full of presence, was taking pictures of the bear. ♦



# NO WAY TO SAY GOODBYE

BY LARRY DAVID

June 25, 1942. The day I went off to war. My sweetheart, Alice, whom I started dating my junior year of high school, drove me to the station to see me off. We were in love, and the thought of being apart was overwhelming for both of us.

Alice parked the car, and we held hands as we walked silently through the station and out onto the platform. Our hearts bursting, we gazed at each other for a few moments before she spoke. I remember the conversation almost verbatim.

"Promise you'll come back to me."

"I promise."

"And promise you'll write to me."

"Of course I'll write to you."

"Every day."

"Every day? Hmm. Well, I'll certainly try. I mean, I'll be in a war. I'll be fighting. But, sure, if I have the time to do it, I will."

"Nan gets letters from Brad every day."

"Yeah, but Brad is some sort of adjutant in an office. He has a desk. If I were in an office with a desk, I'd write three times a day. Also, now that I think about it, I don't know where I'll be getting all this paper from. I can't really walk around with a ream of paper in my knapsack. It's pretty heavy as it is. I gotta carry bullets, grenades, a sleeping bag, a canteen. I don't know if I can load up with paper."

"I'm not asking you to load up, but I'm certainly worth a few sheets."

"Absolutely you're worth a few sheets. You're taking this all wrong."

"How does everyone else manage to write?"

"That's a good question, and, believe me, it's one I intend to get to the bottom of," I said, catching a glimpse of myself in the train window.

Damn, I looked good in a uniform.

"Did you at least pack a pen?"

"I did, but, I'm not gonna lie, it was skipping a little, so there's a good chance it could run out in the first letter."

"Well, get another one. Maybe a few."

"Not really sure if they sell pens on the front. And you know what I'm like with pens. They fall out of my pocket. The good news is that I think they have some pretty good pockets in Army pants. Maybe even with zippers! I don't know why all pockets don't have zippers. You know, when I come home, maybe I'll get into the pants-with-zipper-pockets business," I went on, popping a Life Saver into my mouth in preparation for our goodbye kiss.

She looked at me strangely.

"What's that look for? You don't think zipper pockets are a good idea?"

"Sounds like you don't want to write at all!"

"Alice, I just said I'll look into the whole thing once I get situated! I want to write. The problem is—"

"I know, the paper and pen."

"Right! And the time. Suppose I'm fighting all day, killing people, getting fired at. Saving buddies. Canteen low on water. I get back to base camp, exhausted, filthy. My first thought, if I can be perfectly honest, is going to be to sit down, relax, have some C rations—that's food that comes in a can."

"I know what C rations are!"

"Anyway, after the rations, I'm going to look into a shower or something. You know how fussy I am about being clean. So, after all that, yes, if I have the pen and paper, I'll try to write, although it might be dark. I suppose I can use a flash-

light, but it'll be tough to hold the pen and the flashlight at the same time. And, by the way, if it's windy all bets are off."

"O.K., enough! You know what? I don't even want you to write."

It was time to board. I hesitated, not wanting to leave her like this.

"Boy, you're really twisting things here. I just can't believe that after a day of putting my life on the line for you and our American way of life the first thing you want me to do is somehow come up with a sheet of paper and a pen that works and write you some long letter. I have to say, it's starting to feel like a homework assignment. I'm not Shakespeare, for God's sake. I mean, if anybody should be writing every day, it's you. You've got time. And a desk."

I picked up my duffel. "I better go." I moved in for a kiss, but she recoiled. Crushed by this unfortunate turn of events, I shook my head and boarded. Once seated, I leaned out to her.

"Alice, this is no way to say goodbye."

"I'm serious. Don't write at all."

"Don't be like that!"

"No. Here's your ring. I don't want it." She threw it, nailing me in the forehead, where it left an imprint that lasted until I got to North Africa.

As the train pulled away, I called out, "Alice, please!"

But she stood firm. "Goodbye."

"O.K., Alice, I'll write!" I shouted desperately. "Surely someone will loan me a pen and a few sheets of paper!"

"I hope they shoot you in the arm and then you won't have to think about it." With that, she walked away. I never saw her again.

In the end, the things I said about the pens and the paper were all true. On the front, guys were constantly complaining that they didn't have time to write and that paper got all crumpled in their knapsacks. Pens were in such demand that they were constantly being stolen. And don't even get me started on stamps.

I did, however, find time to write to Alice one lonely night with my flashlight on. This had the tragic consequence of alerting a troop of German soldiers to our whereabouts, resulting in the deaths of my platoon leader and the guy whose backpack I had pilfered for paper. I myself was shot in the arm, making it impossible for me to ever pick up a rifle again, much less a pen. ♦





PROFILES

# DONALD GLOVER CAN'T SAVE YOU

*The creator of "Atlanta" wants TV  
to tell hard truths. Is the audience ready?*

BY TAD FRIEND

*Glover takes an ambivalent view of his widespread acclaim. "People accept me now because I have power, but they still think,*



*Oh, he thinks he's the golden flower of the black community, thinks he's so different," he said. "But I am, though!"*

PHOTOGRAPHS BY AWOL ERIZKU



Donald Glover sat behind the wheel of the Nissan Sentra, his door ajar, and lit a joint. In the scene he'd just finished, for the show "Atlanta," he'd jammed on the brakes to avoid a wild boar in the road, an apparition that made him wonder just how high he was. On this crisp October morning, the car was parked beside Gun Club Road in northwest Atlanta, a woodsy region where a few shacks and a cemetery were all that gestured toward urban life. "This isn't real," Glover said—his joint was a prop, filled with clover and marshmallow leaves. "But it actually makes me feel kind of high. Smoking in the car like high school." He passed the joint to his co-star Zazie Beetz, who inhaled companionably as Glover nodded along to the rhythm of the door-alarm beeps.

Glover is the thirty-four-year-old creator, head writer, occasional director, and star of "Atlanta," the black comedy about black life—three men and a woman going nowhere much, and beginning to realize it—that in its first season won two Golden Globes, two Emmys, and nearly universal admiration. Chris Rock told me, "'Atlanta' is the best show on TV, period." In this episode, from the second season (which débuts this Thursday, on FX), Glover and Beetz's characters, Earnest (Earn) Marks and Vanessa (Van) Keifer, are driving north from Atlanta in Van's old Sentra to a German festival called *Fastnacht*. Van, who speaks German for reasons we never learn, is excited; Earn, who inclines toward watchful truculence, is not. Earn and Van have a daughter and they sleep together off and on, but they are not precisely a couple. "At FX, they didn't get Earn and Van at all," Glover told me. "I said, 'This is every one of my aunts—you have a kid with a guy, he's around, you're still attracted to him.' Poor people can't afford to go to therapy."

As they waited for the next scene, Beetz turned the conversation to marriage; she and her boyfriend had been talking about engagement rings. Glover said, "Yeah, I'm not the marrying kind." (He and his partner, Michelle, had a nineteen-month-old son, Legend, and she was eight months pregnant with their second son.) He took a hit, then went on, "I'm O.K. with some rituals.

If you grew up knowing there was a bear in your future, because your dad kept telling you, 'When you're thirteen, you're going to have to kill a bear,' then, when you turned thirteen, you would kill the bear." Beetz was baffled. "The bear," she repeated. The door was still beeping, the way a jarring sound grows in a scene until you realize it's an alarm clock and it was all a dream.

"Atlanta" has the hallucinatory quality of *déjà rêvé*; no other show would conjure up, then banish, a black rapper named Justin Bieber. The series, shot almost entirely on location, shifts its setting and focus every episode, mapping the city in the fanciful manner of a medieval cartographer. Hiro Murai, who directs most of the episodes, said, "Atlanta is Wild West-y—every corner of the city is trying to get by under its own rules. There's no single narrative. At the outer edges, the overgrown parking lots and project blocks, the city is a few yards away from apocalypse, and if you slow down it could engulf you." As the crew had set up for the boar scene, a nearly toothless man driving a beat-up Honda stacked with Twinkies and Valvoline made a U-turn to try to get in front of the cameras. At a barricade cordoning off the shoot, he called out, "Yo, shrimps, here comes Johnny!"

Glover grew up just outside Atlanta, and he makes the city look both vast and confiningly tiny, as it might to an onlooker playing with a telescope. In the pilot episode, Earn, a rootless Princeton dropout who's been doing odd jobs, goes to his cousin Alfred Miles's house with a proposition—and is greeted with a gun in his face. Alfred, a rapper known as Paper Boi, who pays his bills by dealing drugs, is beginning to be a local success, and in a crabs-in-a-barrel city everyone wants to pull him back into the barrel. Alfred's roommate, Darius, a slinky conspiracy theorist, lowers his knife when he sees that Earn poses no threat and offers him a cookie.

EARN: I want to manage you.

ALFRED: Manage? You know where the word "manage" come from?

EARN: *Manus*. Latin for "hand."

ALFRED: Probl'y, but I'm a say no for the purpose of my argument. "Manage" came from the word "man." And, um, that ain't really your lane.

EARN: My lane?

ALFRED: Yeah, man. I need Malcolm. You

too Martin. You know what they did to him? They killed him.

EARN: Didn't they kill Malcolm, too?

DARIUS: No, no, they say that. But ain't nobody seen the body since the funeral.

EARN: (*Beat*) That's how funerals work.

Glover's dialogue exhibits a saltatory quality that also defines his career. As a boy, he wanted to be a wedding planner. Instead, he has been a sketch comic; a standup comedian; a writer on "30 Rock"; an actor on "Community"; a d.j. named mc DJ; a musician known as Childish Gambino, who was nominated for five Grammys this year; and a budding movie star, who will appear as both Lando Calrissian in "Solo: A Star Wars Story," out in May, and Simba in a live-action version of "The Lion King." "He can push the envelope in all these different areas," Ryan Coogler, a friend of Glover's, who wrote and directed "Black Panther," said. "*And it's not that difficult for him.*"

Slim but thick-chested and broad-shouldered, Glover has the rolling, slew-footed walk of a riverboat captain. In a group, he laughs as often as he makes others laugh, a trait rare among the occupationally funny. Acquaintances love to proclaim how warm or chill or dope he is, but none of that is exactly right, or exactly right for long. He answers the phone warily, as if it were always 3 A.M., as if he were on guard against his own immense likableness. He is attracted to people who don't seem to want his approval, but, increasingly, everyone does.

In Hollywood, Glover has become the model for how to succeed on your own terms. Lena Dunham, the creator and star of "Girls," said, "At least twenty people have told me, 'I'd like to make something like "Atlanta." 'And I say, 'Oh, you mean a show that toggles between painful drama and super-surrealist David Lynch moments to take on race in America?' That's not a genre—that's *Donald*."

Glover has always been told he doesn't sound black or Southern, loaded compliments he rejects. He has a house in Atlanta and a studio in Los Angeles, and often rents a place in Kauai, but he rarely settles in any of them. When he's in L.A., he sleeps on a couch at the studio, in Silver Lake. One night in January, he drove to Target to buy a blanket



to make it cozier. He was feeling immense pressure to edit the show and promote it, make his next album, and finish work on “The Lion King,” along with an animated show he’s making for FX, “Deadpool.” Everyone was calling, texting, expecting. The next morning, after sleeping his customary four or five hours, he wrote a reminder in red ballpoint and posted it on the wall: “Make the best sand castle.” The goal wasn’t to please all the supplicants; the goal was to resist getting too comfortable. “If I was white, I wouldn’t be sleeping on no couch,” he told me. “But Ryan Coogler said the most real-as-fuck shit to me about it. He said, ‘It sounds like *you’re* not ready to get off the couch.’”

Jordan Peele, the writer and director of the racial-horror film “Get Out,” said, “For black people, ‘Atlanta’ provides the catharsis of ‘*Finally*, some elevated black shit.’” For white people, Glover wants the catharsis to be an old-fashioned plunge into pity and fear. “I don’t even want them laughing if they’re laughing at the caged animal in the zoo,” he said. “I want them to really experience racism, to really feel what it’s like to be black in America. People come to ‘Atlanta’ for the strip clubs and the music and the cool talking, but the eat-your-vegetables part is that the characters aren’t smoking weed all the time because it’s cool but because they have P.T.S.D.—every black person does. It’s scary to be at the bottom, yelling up out of the hole, and all they shout down is ‘Keep digging! We’ll reach God soon!’”

Glover and Beetz tooled up and down Gun Club Road for hours, getting filmed from one side and then the other as they chatted about why they were going to *Fastnacht*. Earn and Van are feeling floaty and relaxed, enjoying each other—a setup for quarrels to come.

As the crew reset, Glover said, “You know what I always wanted to do for an episode?” Just then, that week’s director, Amy Seimetz, called, “O.K., action!” The actors ran the scene again. On “Cut!,” Glover continued his thought: “Yeah, so it’s the exact same thing, only with a bunch of white people who kind of look like us. And in the middle of the episode you realize it’s called ‘Boston.’”

After a few more takes, Glover said,

“I have an idea for a movie about a hipster guy surviving in his house after the end of the world—no canned food, no water. None of us are equipped to survive for even two weeks.”

“Whoa,” Beetz said.

“I watch ‘Cast Away’ so much”—the Robert Zemeckis film in which Tom Hanks is stranded on a tropical island—“because he’s just scrapping shit together, and it feels so real. There’s barely any spectacle. People want that right now. They just want to know how to survive when the world ends.”

As Beetz shook her head, laughing, Seimetz came over. Glover told her, “I’m pitching, but I’m doing a terrible job.”

“You *are* doing a terrible job,” Beetz said.

“But then Kevin Hart comes in!” he exclaimed, mugging like the comedy-film star. “And he fucking kills it! Money, please?”

Seimetz, who had caught Glover’s eye with her show “The Girlfriend Experience,” said afterward, “The great thing about Donald is he has a lot of ideas. But he has a *lot* of ideas.”

When they broke for lunch, Glover

and Beetz rode to base camp in a Chevy Suburban driven by his outsized bodyguard, Jason Cornelius. “4 AM,” by 2 Chainz, played, and Glover rapped along, nailing every inflection. They started talking about trap music, a poundingly kinetic form of Atlanta rap that originated in the crack-and-weed dens known as trap houses. “The rhythm of it is interesting,” Beetz said, “but I feel abandoned by the lyrics. Rhyming ‘blunt’ with ‘blunt’ with ‘blunt’—”

“It’s music for making drugs by,” Glover explained, his brow furrowing. He lost his virginity to a trap song, and one of his goals for “Atlanta” is to make the show feel as vital as the music that constitutes half its soundtrack.

Cornelius said, “I agree with her, though. You want some more metaphorical language, like Jay-Z.”

“Jay-Z be saying the same shit, too!” Glover said. “O.K., take ‘The Race,’ by Tay-K. Play that fuck right now, if you got it.” As Cornelius searched Spotify, Glover explained, “Tay-K was sixteen and on the run for murder when he made this song. It’s a real Jesse James story.” He pulled up Tay-K’s photo on his phone





*"What's the point of having a conspiracy theory if everyone's going to conspire against it?"*

as "The Race" began to boom. Glover said, "Look at this kid! He's a baby! He never had a chance! Y'all are forgetting what rap *is*. Rap is 'I don't care what you think in society, wagging your finger at me for calling women "bitches"—when, for you to have two cars, I have to live in the projects.'"

"That makes me think differently about it," Beetz said.

Glover stared off. "Young black kid in Texas with a murder on him," he said, finally. "He's definitely going to die, and it's sad."

Beetz told me that she adored Glover without beginning to understand him. "After the premiere of the show," she said, "I asked Donald how he felt, and he said, 'I'm a very complex person,' almost apologetically, and walked away." Glover explained, "The sound was all fucked up and the guy at the controls wouldn't let me touch it, so it didn't quite hit. Everyone else was super happy, but I couldn't be, and I felt really mad at myself, because I was ruining it for everyone else." He laughed. "To be honest, I was probably just high. I *am* compli-

cated, though. People expect me to be one thing—'You're a musician!' 'You're a comedian!' 'You're a coon!'—and I was just feeling high and pinned down." He feels constantly watched but rarely seen.

In the old days of television, when four networks dominated the industry, the survival standard was clear. A show thrived by attracting a huge audience, and it attracted a huge audience by being diverting yet comforting. You just needed that actor everyone liked, Tony Danza or Ted Danson, or a new spin on an old premise: he's obsessive-compulsive or paranoid schizophrenic or has Asperger's and she's bipolar—but they all solve crimes or medical mysteries! David Simon, who wrote for the NBC procedural "Homicide" in the nineties, before he created "The Wire" and "The Deuce" for HBO, said, "'Homicide' pulled ten million people on a Friday night, and we were in third place, getting creamed. To stay on the air, you had to sell reassurance, with every story being resolved before the last commercial. Everything had to be bigger than people actually are—

you had to have the most surprising people fucking and blow shit up in a ball of fire. And you could never have a majority black or Asian or Latino show, because you'd lose audience."

"The Sopranos," which arrived on HBO in 1999, established a new benchmark, verisimilitude; in the fifth episode, we saw the Mob boss Tony Soprano strangling an informant. That creative breakthrough allowed shows to aim for smaller but more fervent audiences, to traffic not in quirky heroes but in flawed Everymen prone to depression and savagery. It allowed adult drama, which was expiring as a film genre, to be reborn on television.

Nowadays, as sixty-one cable networks and streaming services seek to distinguish their entries among the four hundred and eighty-seven scripted shows in production, verisimilitude matters, but only as much as attitude and mood. Ambiguity has become a selling point, with nonlinear storytelling the new norm. Many dramas are designed to be solved or resolved online, where fans can collaborate to crack open the hidden Easter eggs. On "True Detective," the bible—the document explaining the show to network executives—promised that it "reinvents the procedural form using a unique, layered story structure which braids multiple time periods and employs occasionally unreliable narration." " Fargo " 's bible declared that "Season One Is a Triangle," only to playfully add, in a footnote, "Or wait. Maybe Season One is a circle." Structure is the new Tony Danza.

After "Louie" debuted, in 2010, as a set of fractured episodes about the comedian Louis C.K.'s dreams and fantasies, comedies, too, began to experiment with form and tone. As a showrunner character declared on the Showtime comedy "Episodes," justifying his humor-free approach, "Comedies don't have to be funny anymore. . . . You just have to end after thirty minutes. That's it, bang, you're a comedy."

While this expanded universe allowed for inventive shows about minorities, such as "Fresh Off the Boat" and "Transparent," which Amazon judged a hit with only 1.5 million viewers, African-American programming remained stuck. Dramas like "Scandal" and "Empire" had proved that shows

with black protagonists could generate both ratings and chatter on “Black Twitter,” but they were old-fashioned “adult soaps” whose characters were conspicuously bigger than people actually are. In sitcoms, there were few alternatives to such Tyler Perry confections as “House of Payne” and “For Better or Worse”—shotgun marriages of slapstick and melodrama. Kenya Barris, the creator of the ABC sitcom “Black-ish,” said, “Executives wanted more of the Tyler Perry model. They looked to make all our voices monolithic.”

Creative risk, for black sitcom creators, still felt unfairly risky. Issa Rae told me that when she co-created and starred in the HBO sitcom “Insecure,” about two black women friends in Los Angeles, she knew that “if it didn’t work I’d have closed a door for a lot of other people. It had to be *great*.” Even now that “Black-ish” is in its fourth season, Barris wonders if he dares to introduce what on a white show would be a standard device: a black-and-white dream episode. He said, “Every time you do something and it fails, it’s not just an episode of television that didn’t work—you *have failed the culture*.”

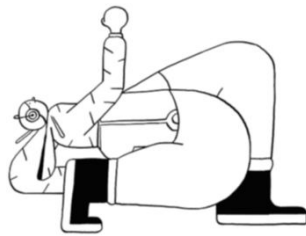
When Glover conceived of “Atlanta,” in 2013, he was prepared to fail spectacularly. But to fail spectacularly he had to first get on the air. He wrote the pilot accordingly. There was a standard cold open: a flash-forward to Alfred (played by Brian Tyree Henry) shooting a guy in a beef outside a liquor store. Then, after we were introduced to the main characters, including Earn’s withholding father (the winning character actor Isiah Whitlock, Jr.), we watched Earn spar about money and childcare with Van and work to establish his managerial bona fides with Alfred by paying a radio d.j. to play his new song. There was even some Twitter bait: a bow-tied guru who offered Earn a Nutella sandwich on the bus, and who, by TV logic, would inevitably return to guide him down some mildly surprising path.

“I knew what FX wanted from me,” Glover said. “They were thinking it’d be me and Craig Robinson”—the “Hot Tub Time Machine” actor—“horse-tailing around, and it’ll be kind of like ‘Community,’ and it’ll be on for a long time.

I was Trojan-horsing FX. If I told them what I really wanted to do, it wouldn’t have gotten made.” Stephen Glover, Glover’s thirty-year-old brother and his closest collaborator on the show, said, “Donald promised, ‘Earn and Al work together to make it in the rough music industry. Al got famous for shooting someone and now he’s trying to deal with fame, and I’ll have a new song for him every week. Darius will be the funny one, and the gang’s going to be all together.’ That was the Trojan horse.”

The Glovers viewed the network’s notes—Can we see Earn be special? Where’s his “win”?—as meddling, and felt that the execs got excited about the pilot only after it tested well. But the C.E.O., John Landgraf, did tell Glover early on, “The parts that you’re worried we’re going to think are too weird—lean into those.” FX let him hire a young, untried, all-black writing staff, most of them members of Royalty, a crew of men in Glover’s circle who modelled themselves on the Kennedy clan. (Stephen Glover said, “We decided that we should all live like American royalty, a union of kings.”) The network also let Glover bring in his favorite music-video director, Hiro Murai, who’d never directed television. “If I were FX, I wouldn’t have hired me,” Murai said.

So the weirdness commenced. In the second episode, which Earn spent in jail, a funny scene of a mentally ill guy who spits toilet water on a cop pivots abruptly



when he gets beaten at length, while the other prisoners try to pretend it’s not happening. In the episodes that followed, Alfred and Darius, rather than following Earn’s managerial advice straight to the top, ended up acting as his life coaches. Earn’s father vanished from the story—and so did the Nutella guru and the guy Alfred shot, his supposed ticket to fame.

“Trojan-horsing” is a term beloved among show creators, who believe that network executives want a dab of origi-

inality, but mostly for marketing purposes. When Jenji Kohan explained to NPR why she’d created the prison show “Orange Is the New Black” around the character of Piper, an attractive, upper-middle-class white woman, she said, “Piper was my Trojan horse. You’re not going to go into a network and sell a show on really fascinating tales of black women and Latina women and old women and criminals.”

In the metaphor, a thing that looks like a horse contains surprises for your enemies. In Glover’s version, a thing that looks like a horse turns out to be an alligator. He told his writers, “We’re the punk show—what’s the most punk thing to do?” Jamal Olori, a member of Royalty, told me, “We always said, ‘We want to fuck up television.’ Donald would teach us the rules so we could break them.”

“Atlanta” broke rules that most viewers hadn’t quite realized were rules. In comedies, jokes are underlined by close-ups, but “Atlanta”’s camera stayed aloof, serving not as an exclamation point but as a neutral bystander. The characters didn’t have histrionic reactions to the problem of the week; they just gave up a little more. Earn was an antihero, as is now customary, but, unlike Don Draper or Walter White or Olivia Pope, he wasn’t an expert in anything. He wasn’t a great manager or a great part-time boyfriend or, for that matter, a particularly promising human being. Curiously boyish in shorts and a backpack, he wasn’t even active, the minimal standard for television characters. He didn’t seem to do or want anything. He just watched and flinched and got yelled at to grow up.

The biggest innovation was that the narrative never advanced: Earn and Alfred made no headway. The lone moment of arrival felt like a setback. As the season progressed, we realized that Earn secretly wanted one thing very badly: a place to stay. In the final minute of the last episode, we see him for the first time in his only actual home—a cot in a storage unit. “When I saw all the episodes together, I hated the show,” Lakeith Stanfield, who plays Darius, said. “The pacing was strange, there was a lot of space between things, and I didn’t understand Darius. But as I watched it more it began to reveal itself to me.” David Simon said, “I felt like Donald Glover was doing an entire show of the



moments we treasured on “The Wire”—the asides between drug sellers on the corner, the pop-culture riffs—“where we were stealing one back from television. Watching it felt *luxurious*.”

The seventh episode, written and directed by Glover, broke format completely. It was an unbridled parody of Black Entertainment Television, centered on a “transracial” black teen-ager named Antoine, who, by practicing remarks like “Excuse me, what I.P.A. do you have on tap?,” is preparing to surgically transition into a thirty-five-year-old white man named Harrison. The only familiar character was Paper Boi, who appeared as a panelist discussing trans issues. And the episode’s commercials were fake ads for products such as Mickey’s Malt Liquor and Swisher Sweets, the cigarillos often used for blunt wraps. An animated spot for a fictitious cereal called Coconut Crunch-O’s ended with a white cop arresting a wolf for coveting the black kids’ Crunch-O’s, then kneeling on the wolf’s back and snarling at the kids to back off.

John Landgraf said, “The fact that Donald wasn’t going to be in the episode at all gave us pause. But I came to understand that he had a larger structure in mind than any of us knew. Donald and his collaborators are making an existential comedy about the African-American experience, and they are not

translating it for white audiences.” If they were, he said, “the show would have white characters in it to say, ‘You, the audience, should relate to these black characters the way the white characters on the show do.’” (Issa Rae said that when she was making her Web series, “The Misadventures of Awkward Black Girl,” “someone told me, ‘White people watch if you put a white character in it.’ And it turned out it kind of *was* that simple.”)

Landgraf added, “I don’t have a problem with the Trojan-horse narrative if it’s important to Donald. We’re in the business of making pieces of commercial television that mask deeper artistic narratives.” On “Atlanta,” though, the mask feels flimsy. Glover said, “The hardest part is surprising FX every time. They need that to feel that you’re an authentic black person. I surprised them up front by telling them I wanted to make them money.” To soothe viewers, he devised a series of scenes in which Earn and Alfred and Darius sit on a discarded couch behind Alfred’s apartment and smoke weed—daffy moments that serve as “Atlanta”’s version of the “Cheers” ritual when Norm walks in and everyone cries, “Norm!”

Glover understands that his sand castles have to be profitable, and he’s less surprised than FX is that “Atlanta” is the most watched comedy in the network’s

history. The point he’s had trouble conveying, to the networks and studios and record companies, is that the sand castles people cherish most are the handmade ones with melted edges. With a bleak chuckle, he said, “Steve always reminds me, ‘FX didn’t want to do this show—you had to beg them. Fuck them!’ I like Landgraf, I’ve learned a lot from him, but FX is a business. It’s not there to make some kid from Stone Mountain, Georgia,’s dreams come true.”

I rang the bell at Glover’s house, in Atlanta’s increasingly hip Inman Park, for a very long time. The shades were drawn and there was no apparent pulse of life. Finally, Glover cracked the door, blinking. He’d been having his I.T. bands massaged to relieve stress, and he didn’t seem particularly happy that I’d kept our appointment. He told me that he found it draining to trust people, and each time we spoke I had the feeling of laboring to reestablish a connection. “You do always start from zero with Donald,” his music manager, Fam Udeorji, told me. “He reads you every time he sees you, and, like an A.I. that does facial recognition, he’s processing so many faces he can’t always fully understand the nuances of emotion and the incentives behind them.”

The house felt like an encampment: a stroller thrust aside, boxes stacked by the door. Glover was wearing a white T-shirt and a brown wool cape and pants, like an off-duty ringmaster. After taking up a cross-legged perch in his living room, he called “Yo, Steve!” to his brother, who was living upstairs, but there was no answer. Growing up, Donald was light-skinned and sunny, and his friends were the white kids at his school for the performing arts; Stephen was darker-skinned and stoic, and his friends were the bused-in black kids at his school, which was not for the performing arts. The relationship between Earn and Alfred—the darker-skinned relative who plaintively says, “I scare people at A.T.M.s! I *have* to rap!”—is a rough parallel. Many of the show’s rawer moments are underpinned by real-life affronts that Stephen sustained; the second episode’s jailhouse beating stemmed from a day he spent in jail after being arrested for possessing a gram of weed. Glover said, “My consciousness began to change when I hung out with Steve as an adult, because



*“My ultimate goal is to buy it by the pound in nice thin slices.”*

he's scarier to white people. It made me super-black." He was incensed that Stephen had recently been unable to rent an apartment on Airbnb: "This woman turned him down, supposedly because his posture was bad—in the *photo*. O.K., he's one of the two smartest people I know, and his only crime was he wanted to give you four thousand dollars!"

As the brothers grew up in Stone Mountain, just east of Atlanta, they came to share an understanding that life was a bad dream and that laughter was a way to wake yourself up. Glover's father, Donald, Sr., was a postal worker, and his mother, Beverly, was a day-care provider. After they had Donald and Stephen, the couple took in numerous foster children and adopted two of them: some of the children had been molested, some had parents who were murdered, some would die. "We had a cousin with AIDS and we couldn't keep her and save her," Glover said. "All the drugs she needed were in New York City and California. That still feels like a family tragedy."

The Glovers were Jehovah's Witnesses. They believed that Satan controls life on earth, that only a hundred and forty-four thousand anointed Christians will be saved to Heaven with Jesus, and that we are living out the last days before Armageddon. Stephen Glover said, "We were wised up early to not celebrating our birthdays and that there was no Santa Claus and no magic. Our mom made us watch 'Mississippi Burning' when I was six, and she always warned me about wearing saggy pants and said, 'If someone sucks your penis, come tell me.'" Glover said, "I know Mom was doing all that to protect us, but it gave me nightmares. I wouldn't go into bathrooms alone or eat anything except turkey."

Beverly Glover forbade all television but PBS—animal shows and slavery documentaries. Donald, Sr., sometimes let the kids watch Bugs Bunny cartoons and Bill Murray movies. Glover would secretly turn the television on with the sound low and tape episodes of "The Simpsons" on his Talkboy recorder so that he and Stephen could listen to them later: archeologists reconstructing the popular culture of their own time.

Glover announced early on that he wanted to attend N.Y.U.'s Tisch School of the Arts and then write for "The Simpsons." That seemed unattainable,

but so did most of his desires. When Nintendo 64 came out, in 1996, his mother declared it too expensive. Stephen Glover told me, "I said, 'Oh, well.' But Donald heard on Radio Disney that they were giving a Nintendo 64 away to the ninetieth caller every day for a week. He listened all week and kept calling in until he gauged the perfect time, and one day he ran upstairs and said, 'I won



it! He's always been able to will what he wants."

In Glover's living room, his son, Legend, ran in clutching a plastic giraffe. Glover hugged him and fell backward. "Shoe, Daddy, there!" Legend cried, pointing at his own shoe. "That's right," his father said, holding him aloft.

As Legend bustled over to show me the giraffe, Glover said that he thinks of reality as a program and his talent as hacking the code: "I learn fast—I figured out the algorithm." Grasping the machine's logic had risks. "When people become depressed and kill themselves, it's because all they see is the algorithm, the loop," he said. But it was also exhilarating. When he was ten, he said, "I realized, if I want to be good at P.E., I have to be good at basketball. So I went home and shot baskets in our driveway for six hours, until my mother called me in. The next day, I was good enough that you wouldn't notice I was bad. And I realized my superpower." During a lunch break on set one day, in the gym of a Baptist church, I had watched Glover play 21 against five crew members. He made three long jumpers, then began charging the lane to launch Steph Curry-style runners—stylish, ineffective forays facilitated by the crew's reluctance to play tough D. "It sounds like I'm sucking my own dick—'Oh, he thinks he's great at everything,'" he said now, leaning forward. "*But what if you had that power?*"

I asked why, given his talents and ambitions, he'd bothered to do a two-scene cameo as a small-time crook in "Spider-

Man: Homecoming." It was clear why Marvel and Sony, the studios involved, cast him. Kevin Feige, Marvel's president, told me, "When we tested the film, even with that tiny role, Donald was one of the audience's favorite characters." (As Feige acknowledged, the decision was also inspired by an Internet campaign to make Glover the first black Spider-Man.) Glover said he took the role because "I learn so much. I learn how Marvel movies work, how to handle guest stars, how to make execs happy when they come on set. I gain some of your power. Only now I'm running out of places to learn, at least in America."

When Glover directed "Atlanta" for the first time, on the BET episode, he said, "I wasn't worried that I was going to shit the bed. I was only worried how people might take it, that I was just coming in as the creator and assuming I could be a director. I don't look at what they do as easy." He grinned, slowly. "I just look at what they do." Hiro Murai told me that Glover's aptitude could be galling: "The day before Donald directed, he said, 'Hey, do you have any tips?' I was mad, because I knew, You're going to be fine—you'll pick it up naturally, the way you pick up everything. And then he won an Emmy!" (Glover began his acceptance speech by saying, "First, I want to thank the great algorithm that put us all here.")

Is there anything you're bad at? "To be honest, no. Probably just people. People don't like to be studied, or bested." He shrugged. "I'm fine with it. I don't really like people that much. People accept me now because I have power, but they still think, Oh, he thinks he's the golden flower of the black community, thinks he's so different." He laughed. "But I am, though! I feel like Jesus. I do feel chosen. My struggle is to use my humanity to create a classic work—but I don't know if humanity is worth it, or if we're going to make it. I don't know if there's much time left."

Legend offered him the giraffe and asked, "What does a giraffe say?" His father repeated the question, giving it serious thought. "I have no idea what a giraffe says." Michelle passed through, very pregnant but serene, to collect Legend and head to Whole Foods. Glover had a nearly wordless exchange with her that conveyed concern for her health,

the duty to remain with me, and a curiosity about dinner.

He stretched his legs, wincing. “I tell stories because that’s the best way of spreading information,” he said. “We’re all tricking and toying and playing with each other’s senses to affect this thing hidden inside our skulls.” He drew a circle in the air, then jabbed a finger, trying to penetrate it. “That’s what Earn is trying to do with Alfred—tell him a story so he can get into his understanding and make him do what he wants.” He pulled his hand back, sheepishly. “I just realized I’m drawing an egg-and-sperm kinda thing.”

Do you look up to anyone? “I don’t see anyone out there who’s better,” he said. “Maybe Elon Musk. But I don’t know yet if he’s a supervillain. Elon is working on ways for storytelling *not* to be the best way of spreading information.” Musk’s new company, Neuralink, intends to merge human consciousness with computers, allowing us to download others’ thoughts. “It will turn us into a connected macro-organism, but it will make our individual desires seem trivial,” Glover went on. “Sometimes I get mad at him—‘You think people are insignificant!’ But we probably are at the end of the storytelling age. It’s my job to compress the last bits of information for people before it passes.” He sighed. “The thing I imagine myself being in the future doesn’t exist yet. I wish it was just ‘Oh, I’ll be Oprah,’ or ‘I’ll be Dave Chappelle.’ But it’s not that. It’s something different and more, something involving fairness and restoring a sense of honor. Sometimes I dream of it, but how do you explain a dream where you never see your father, but you know that that’s him over your shoulder?” It was very quiet. “It’d be nice to feel less lonely.”

Amey Seimetz studied the playback of a *Fastnacht* scene and cracked up. The revellers were dressed in traditional German costumes—*Bundhosen*, dirndls, and papier-mâché animal masks—and Earn, wearing jeans and a white hockey-goalie mask, of the kind worn by the serial killer in “Friday the 13th,” looked totally out of place. Seimetz motioned Glover over to the monitor to watch, and he cracked up, too. “Such a bad idea,” he said, pleased.

Wearing the mask pushed up on his forehead, Glover wandered into the park-

ing lot outside the set, a Moose Lodge in Griffin, Georgia, an hour south of Atlanta. It was a balmy evening, near sunset, and Seimetz was going to shoot the final scene for another episode across the road. “We use every part of the Moose,” Glover said dryly. Then he began to talk about a racial anxiety he’d experienced on set the previous night.

On African-American shows, racial anxiety often gets dramatized as a special episode about the N-word. On “Black-ish,” the Johnson family argued about its propriety, and Dre, the father, finally told his son—who’d been suspended from school for singing along to the word in Kanye West’s “Gold Digger”—to “hold off on saying it until you know the history of it, to make your own decision.” On “The Carmichael Show,” on NBC, a similar family debate ensued after a white friend of Jerrod’s greeted him with “My nigga!” Jerrod’s girlfriend, Maxine, said, “It’s the last word that so many black people heard as they were being hung from trees,” but Jerrod contended that “everyone should just use the word constantly, so much until it dilutes its power, it makes it meaningless.”

Glover said, of these episodes, “No black people talk to each other like that, or need to. It’s all for white people.” (“Black-ish”’s audience is about one-fifth black; “Atlanta”’s is half black.) FX told Glover to avoid the N-word in his pilot; the network’s compromise position was that only a white character who says “Really, nigga?” and “You know how niggas out here are” could use it. Recalling the dispute, Glover exclaimed, “I’m black, making a very black show, and they’re telling me I can’t use the N-word! Only in a world run by white people would that happen.”

On the phone call that finally resolved the matter, it was a white executive producer, Paul Simms, who argued successfully for the authenticity of the show’s use of the word. Glover had brought in Simms, the elder statesman on “Girls” and “Flight of the Conchords,” to serve as what black creators call “the white translator.” “You need the translator for the three-minute call after the meeting,” Barris explained. “It’s for when the execs call the white guy to say, ‘What exactly did Kenya mean there?’ and to be reassured.” Since then, “Atlanta” has used the N-word unself-consciously, in

a profusion of ways. This season, Alfred explains to Earn, “You gotta *act* like you better than other niggas so they *treat* you better than other niggas.” Darius chimes in, “Otherwise, you just look like . . . another nigga.”

Glover’s racial anxiety had been about skin color. In the German-festival episode, Van runs into Christina, a childhood friend who’s described in the script as biracial (“think Meghan Markle”), and they have a tense conversation about how Van “chose black” and Christina “chose white.” But when Glover saw Jessica Tillman, the actress he’d hired to play Christina, “I had a mini-panic,” he said. “She wasn’t light-enough-skinned for the role. I instantly felt I was being colorist, but I’m also needing to use her skin tone to tell a story—so, wait!” He laughed. After checking the politics with Stephen, his black translator, Glover decided that “she was light enough,” he said. “It helped that her hair was straighter than Zazie’s, so she could pass.” He frowned, working through the mystery, then went on, “Her skin looked so *different* under the lights. That made it totally clear that it’s all ethereal, it’s all bullshit, that color doesn’t mean anything in a vacuum. But we don’t live in a vacuum.”

Zazie Beetz had told me that she’s often cast for her light skin, as “a pop of color” in a role that could go to a white actress, and that she knew some fans of “Atlanta” had wanted Van to be darker-skinned. “I don’t know if I was cast off of talent instead of look,” she said. “That’s my insecurity.” Glover said that it was talent. “But I was also, like, ‘People are going to feel that way about her—and they *should*.’ We have to show the consequences.” He noted that his own skin color had surely influenced his career, beginning with his first job, as a writer on “30 Rock.” “I wondered, Am I being hired just because I’m black?” Tina Fey, the show’s creator and star, told me that the answer was in large part yes; she admired Glover’s talent but hired him because funds from NBC’s Diversity Initiative “made him *free*.”

Glover ambled over to where Beetz and Lakeith Stanfield and two other actors, all in party costumes, were walking up the road, which was doubling for a road near Tyler Perry’s old mansion in Atlanta, which was itself doubling for Drake’s mansion. It was now dusk,



which was doubling for dawn. Glover looked on, watching for a certain ludic intensity, one hard to choreograph but easy to see. After the last take, Stanfield told Glover, “I didn’t think I’d feel *that*”—he bent over as if gut-punched—“this episode. But every episode has that moment. For me, it was the Bostrom guy.” Darius lays out for a fellow-party-goer the philosopher Nick Bostrom’s argument that future civilizations will surely have computers powerful enough to run simulations of how their ancestors lived. And so, Darius explains, that simulation would very likely be “indistinguishable from reality to the simulated ancestor, i.e., us.”

“That moment is like the hook in music,” Glover said. “It’s what tells you why you’re there.” “Atlanta” is oddly akin to “Black Mirror”: both shows suggest that life is out of control. On “Atlanta,” it’s not technology that’s the catalytic element, the intensifier of our predilection for self-delusion and misery—it’s racism and poverty. The alien power isn’t a watching eye but the absence of a watching eye. Glover and his staff write toward hypnotic images that encapsulate the resulting chaos: a black schoolchild in whiteface, cops swarming an Uber driver and shooting him dead, an invisible car that blasts through a clump of bystanders outside a club. Nick Grad, FX’s president of original programming, said, “When the special effect of the invisible car came in, we watched it, like, twenty times in a row.”

This sensibility is singular yet recognizable. Just as John Cheever’s epiphanies and apologies were stamped by drink and Paul Bowles’s hallucinatory quietude by hashish, so “Atlanta”’s vibe is molded by weed. There’s a goofiness to the action, a dreamy awareness that reality is untrustworthy right now, but hold up, try this edible. Recognizing that quality, Lakeith Stanfield told me, “I decided to play Darius as a high version of myself. And now he’s become all the fantastical elements of Atlanta condensed into one person—this gateway to Freakville.”

“We do everything high,” Glover said. “The effortless chaos of ‘Atlanta’—the moments of enlightenment, followed by an abrupt return to reality—is definitely shaped by weed. When shit is actually going on, no one knows what the fuck is happening.” In this season’s

AND THE BIG BAD WOLF HUFFED AND PUFFED AND BLEW THE WHOLE INCIDENT OUT OF PROPORTION.



first episode, “Alligator Man,” an alligator belonging to Earn’s uncle Willy crawls out a screen door to the swelling tones of the Delfonics song “Hey Love.” Hiro Murai said, “Donald’s scripts, of all the ones we get, make the most visual sense to me. With the alligator scene, I can tell it’s a tonal thing he wants to hit—it’s not about story mechanics but about a quality of light and of the on-lookers’ expressions that’s strange and majestic and ethereal.”

Gazing down the dark road, Glover said, “The alligator walking out and the music blaring—I feel like that all of the time, so I’m going to make all of you feel like that.”

Glover once told me that he found Hansel and Gretel hilarious. “The witch’s whole conceit for getting the children trapped is so elaborate it’s funny: you build a house made of sweets, then lure them to it, then promise them soft beds and warm baths. There’s better, more efficient ways to steal kids!”

While at N.Y.U., Glover conceived of a revealing take on another classic kidnapping tale. As part of a group called Hammerkatz, he auditioned for a time slot at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre with a sketch he’d written, called “Black Peter Pan.” Glover’s winsome Peter tries to persuade the children to follow him to Neverland—but they’re afraid to, because he’s black. Owen Burke,

the artistic director of U.C.B., said, “Donald played it so full of hope and wonder in the face of Wendy and her brothers’ racism—totally committed, completely hilarious. Every once in a while, you get that nineteen-thirties-guy-with-a-cigar moment when you just know, That kid’s going to be a star!”

It was clear that Glover would be a star—it just wasn’t clear, even to him, what kind of star he’d be. In 2006, when he was twenty-three and still living in an N.Y.U. dorm, he was hired to write for “30 Rock.” Tina Fey said, “Donald didn’t pitch for Tracy, the way you’d expect. He pitched for Kenneth.” Tracy Jordan was the eccentric African-American star of a sketch-comedy show; Kenneth was the ingenuous white NBC page who, in a nod to Glover’s background, is from Stone Mountain, Georgia. Glover said, “I did have more in common with Kenneth than with Tracy at that point—I was a wide-eyed kid, eager to please.”

After three years, having learned how to punch up scripts and manage writers and actors, he quit. Six days later, he landed the role of Troy, a washed-up jock, on “Community,” a new NBC sitcom about a gang of misfits who study together at a community college. Dan Harmon, the show’s creator, said, “By the end of Season 2, I literally was writing scenes that ended ‘and then Donald says something to button the scene.’ I’m a pretty narcissistic guy, so for me

to do that I had to know that, one, he was more talented than I was and, two, he was a better person than I was, that he wouldn't misuse his power over me."

Chevy Chase, one of Glover's co-stars, often tried to disrupt his scenes and made racial cracks between takes. ("People think you're funnier because you're black.") Harmon said, "Chevy was the first to realize how immensely gifted Donald was, and the way he expressed his jealousy was to try to throw Donald off. I remember apologizing to Donald after a particularly rough night of Chevy's non-P.C. verbiage, and Donald said, 'I don't even worry about it.'" Glover told me, "I just saw Chevy as fighting time—a true artist has to be O.K. with his reign being over. I can't help him if he's thrashing in the water. But I know there's a human in there somewhere—he's almost too human." (Chase said, "I am saddened to hear that Donald perceived me in that light.") Glover quit in the fifth season, too bored to do it anymore.

Glover explained his periodic career changes by saying, "Authenticity is the journey of figuring out who you are through what you make." When he started doing standup, in college, his sets were about being a black guy with nerdy white-guy interests. He maintained his smiling persona over the years, but his material grew increasingly caustic. One bit was about how terrible children are, how they're "tiny little Hitlers." "Seriously, that's why I wear condoms," he said. "I'd much rather have AIDS than a baby." I asked Glover how he feels about that bit now, as a father. "I was wrong," he instantly replied. "Having AIDS is actually way cheaper than having a baby."

Comedy didn't allow him to express the sadness he'd begun to feel—about race, about fame, about simply being human—so he turned to music. Because of his comedy background, and because he took his stage name, Childish Gambino, from Wu-Tang Clan's name-generating program, everyone expected parody rap. Instead, he offered earnest tracks about being bullied as a child and about suicidal thoughts—a counterpoint to rap's hypermasculine mainstream. Fam Udeorji told me, "People thought Donald was a whiny dude who wasn't into his blackness. And the shorts he wore onstage were so short they made my friends uncomfortable." He added, "Often

## ALMS

Open the hand and give me  
the sweet sweet crumb  
as if a god as if the wind  
as if the burning dew  
as if never  
hear  
open the hand and give me  
the sweet dirty crumb  
or give me perhaps the tender  
heart that sustains you.  
Not the skin or the disordered  
hair or the breath  
or the saliva or  
everything that slips unconnected  
past the skin.  
No if it is possible  
if you hear  
if you are here if I am someone  
if it is not an illusion  
a crazy lens  
a grim mockery  
open the hand and give me  
the dirty dirty crumb  
as if a god as if the wind  
as if the hand that opens  
that distracts destiny  
were granting us a day.

—*Idea Vilariño*

(Translated, from the Spanish, by Jesse Lee Kercheval.)

when I give Donald an assessment like that, he'll turn it up more. His whole thing is to make the weird palatable." But then, lest white people see Gambino's emo-ness as a sign of cultural affinity, he slyly embraced rap's braggadocio:

Yeah, motherfucker, take your phone out  
to record this  
Ain't nobody can ignore this  
I'm more or less a moral-less individual . . .  
(My nigga, hold it horizontal, man, be  
professional)

The more Glover entertained, the more he grew disenchanted with the business of entertainment. "Before my first album came out, I wanted people to like me, and to realize that I had good intentions," he said. "Then I realized that no one has good intentions—we all just have incentives." In 2013, he did a pop-up in Washington Square Park to promote "Because the Internet," the second album of a trilogy for Glassnote Records. The

event was intended as a low-key happening: Glover sat on a park bench and broadcast his songs to about a hundred N.Y.U. students. After he played the album's single, "3005," Glover said, the label's founder, Daniel Glass, "kept screaming for us to 'Play it again!' I was, like, 'No!' He was ruining it with a cash grab." He added that Glass "was trying to buy me Margiela clothes and shit, so I'd work hard for him—but I realized that when I wasn't selling anymore he'd throw me out." Glass told me that if he'd called for more "3005" it was "out of pure passion for the music," and that it was his wife who provided the Margiela clothing—a sweater, bought on sale after Glover had admired a similar one worn by their son. He added, "That's a weird comment when you're nominated for Album of the Year, Record of the Year. I look at this as an incredible success!" Gambino's eerily soulful single "Redbone" went

quadruple platinum last year; Jordan Peele used it in the opening scene of “Get Out” to establish a haunting tone while also reassuring black audiences. But after his next album, for RCA, Glover plans to retire from the music business.

The year that “Internet” came out, Glover appeared in two episodes of HBO’s “Girls”—cast, he suspected, to placate critics of the show’s lily-white sensibility. His character was Sandy, the black Republican boyfriend of Hannah, played by Lena Dunham. When Hannah broke up with him, Sandy began pumping his shoulders to imitate her privileged cluelessness: “‘Oh, I’m a white girl, and I moved to New York and I’m having a great time, and, Oh, I’ve got a fixed-gear bike, and I’m going to date a black guy and we’re going to go to a dangerous part of town.’” Dunham told me that Glover improvised his lines: “Every massive insult of white women was one hundred per cent him. I e-mailed him later to say ‘I hope you feel the part on “Girls” didn’t tokenize you,’ and his response was really Donald-y and enigmatic: ‘Let’s not think back on mistakes we made in the past, let’s just focus on what lies in front of us.’”

In time, Glover’s eagerness for connection gave way to strategic deflection. After watching Matt Damon handle the publicity on their movie “The Martian,” in 2015, he perfected a talk-show-ready geniality. On Jimmy Fallon, he told a tale about being bit on the butt by a dog; on Conan O’Brien, about meeting a sexy coyote; on James Corden, about a seal that popped up beside his surfboard. When I wondered about the authenticity of those anecdotes, he said, “Your job is to be as interesting as possible without actually saying anything.” He grinned. “So, yeah, animal, animal, animal.” Yet it still felt as if he’d given away too much. “I’m scanned into ‘Star Wars’ now, my face and body,” he told me. “Who’s to say that at some point they won’t take that scan and say, ‘Let’s make another movie with Donald. He’s been dead for fifteen years, but we can do whatever we want with him.’”

He’d lost the key to his superpower: the invisibility suit that allowed him to be black in black settings and white enough in white settings, to be the unseen seer. “You walk into the party and realize you *are* the party,” he said. “It’s

‘The only reason I invited all these people is because I hoped you’d come.’ So then it’s just work for me—and, if it’s work, you should pay me. Loyalty becomes math: Does this person live and die by how much money I make? Does this person have children with me and do they care about those children? The equation hasn’t been proved wrong yet. I can count on two fingers the people who actually love me.”

On a misty night, Glover was at a Golden Globes-watching party in the Hollywood Hills. He stood in the kitchen, his back to the wall, having an amiably vehement argument with Stefani Robinson, a confident twenty-five-year-old who writes for “Atlanta.” He wore his white T-shirt and brown wool pants and had a straw hat slung around his neck.

They were discussing the Internet, which Glover declared horrible in every way. (Explaining why he had deleted his social-media presence, he told me, “I felt like social media was making me less human, and I already didn’t feel that human.”) “So why don’t you tell people that?” Robinson asked. Seven or eight other guests, white millennials in entertainment, stood around the kitchen island, listening reverently.

Glover’s eyes widened and he emphasized every word: “Because they would kill this nigga!” Everyone laughed. “Those corporations don’t want anyone to stop the money train.”

“So you know better but you’re keeping the truth quiet—doesn’t that make you complicit?”

“A coward, you mean?” Glover said. “No, it makes me human. All we’re here to do is survive and procreate, pass on our information.”

After carefully fixing a plate from the buffet (salad, pork, roasted vegetables), Glover headed to the terrace and sat by the fire pit. As he ate, he stuck his right sneaker, a white Adidas Yeezy Powerphase Calabasas, into the pit. “I’m going to burn my foot off,” he said, watching the flames surround it. The other guests, in a glass-walled den off the terrace, were watching the Globes. He pulled his sneaker out just before it scorched.

Glover has a quizzical view of the relationship between awards and attainment. Even before the first season aired,

he declared, “The second season of ‘Atlanta’ will be a classic.” But he’d also told me, “A lot of this season is me proving to people that I didn’t get those Emmys just because of affirmative action.” At Glover’s birthday party, in September, he and Brian Tyree Henry had a loud exchange about the topic. “It was just *rage*,” Henry told me. “Because at the end of the day, after we win all these Emmys and get all this love, as soon as the show is over we’re just niggas to you. We were drunk and high, and I was getting really dark. I made Donald come back to my house to *keep* talking about it, and Donald just kept coming back at me: ‘Really, Brian? Really?’”

Glover said, “To Brian, the basic fact that white people don’t want their feelings hurt so we have to make everything palatable to them is really upsetting. I used to feel the anger he feels about it, anger to the point of tears. Now it’s just boring to me. If Brian is Magneto, I’m Professor X”—the X-Men mutants modelled, respectively, on Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

Stefani Robinson had wandered over to listen in. She brought up “Twelve Years a Slave,” the 2013 film that won the Academy Award for Best Picture. “It’s all about Benedict Cumberbatch, but white people don’t see that,” she said.

Glover nodded. “If black people had made that movie,” he said, “they wouldn’t focus on the evil white dude, Michael Fassbender, but on Cumberbatch, who *knows* slavery is wrong, but who still takes advantage of it—which makes him the more painful, horrible monster. On our show, we sometimes have a problem with white actors playing what they think we want them to be: the villain. But it’s more painful if you think you’re not the villain.” Returning to the film, he said, “And there definitely wouldn’t be a Brad Pitt character who comes in and saves the black guy and makes white people feel good about themselves.” A low murmur came from the den.

Didn’t black people actually make “Twelve Years a Slave”? “Yeah,” Glover said. “But in the white system.” He picked up a rock from the fire pit, then dropped it and blew on his fingers. “If ‘Atlanta’ was made just for black people, it would be a very different show. But I can’t even begin to tell you how, because blackness is always seen through



a lens of whiteness—the lens of what white people can profit from at that moment. That hasn't changed through slavery and Jim Crow and civil-rights marches and housing laws and 'We'll shoot you.' Whiteness is equally liquid, but you get to decide your narrative." For the moment, he suggested, white America likes seeing itself through a black lens. "Right now, black is up, and so white America is looking to us to know what's funny." In "Get Out," a blind white art dealer tells Chris, a black photographer whose body has been auctioned off for use by whites, "I want your eye, man—I want those things you see through."

Robinson sank into the cushions and said, "What's frustrating to me is that when Adam Sandler does 'The Waterboy,' about poor whites, he doesn't have to worry about 'What are poor whites going to think?'"

"Or 'What are black people going to think? Are other black people going to call me a coon?'" Glover said.

"If I was the white version of me, I'd be, like, 'My company has a death clause,'" he went on. "If we're not doing what we're supposed to be doing, we should shut down." Why not put in a death clause as the black version of you—as, in fact, you? He laughed in disbelief. "The system is set up so only white people can change things," he said. "If I gave a dog an iPhone, it couldn't use it, because a dog doesn't have an opposable thumb—that's true of *everything* made for white people. I can say there's a problem, you can all laugh at it, but it has to be a group of you guys who change it, because it was made by and for you." He went on, "In a weird way, I feel bad for white people. You guys have put yourselves in the adult position, but you refuse to see it—you're so *lazy*. Paying reparations is realistic, but you just don't want to do it, so you don't let yourself see how things are. So, yeah, I can't help you anymore."

Noting that he often spoke about how life would be different if he were White Donald, I asked Glover how our conversations would be different if I were black. He gave me a considering look. "We'd have a language we both understood, and you'd know me better," he said. "But as Black Tad you'd only be in a position of talking to me because you were good at placating a white audience. As a black person, you have to sell the

black culture to succeed. So I'd try to trust Black Tad, but it's really up to him whether he'd sell us out."

Fam Udeorji had told me, "White Donald would be James Franco—a guy doing a lot of different shit, none of it interesting." I asked Glover if there was a possibility, given his belief that the black experience was more interesting—albeit far more painful—than the white experience, that White Donald wouldn't have ended up where Black Donald has. Very softly, he said, "Would you rather be a person who has all the opportunities but can't see them? Or a person who can see all the opportunities but can't have them?" Probably the latter, I said. You? "Yeah, there's something beautiful about being able to see it all."

He continued, "I went to school with white people who had less talent than me—because I'm talented as *fuck*—and they're doing *way* better than me. I went to N.Y.U. with Lady Gaga." There was a burst of laughter and applause from the den. "Now, CBS ran Grammys ads this week, and I'm one of the hotter acts, and they had a visual of the performers on the show: Lady Gaga, Pink, and me. Only they showed some black kid from a fan video—it's *not even me*. I was, like, Fuck this, fuck them, I'm not going to do the show!" After a moment, he added, quietly, "The sad thing is I'm going to do it, because black people don't get that chance very often."

He picked up a rock from the fire pit, then dropped it. "It's hot! I didn't know it was the same rock." Looking at his singed fingers, he said, "Chris Rock told me, 'Man, they wouldn't have let me make your show back in the day.' I'm a little better than Chris, because I had Chris to study. And now I am actively looking for the black female to replace me." Robinson studied him over the flames. "I'm going to die someday, I hope. Then I won't have all this pain and anguish and pressure. And someone better will replace me. If God exists, all she really wants is a conversation."

In January, Glover began editing "Atlanta" at the show's postproduction offices, a one-story house in Hollywood whose windows were masked by black sheets. Aside from Adobe editing consoles in the front bedrooms, the décor was minimal: couches, rolling office

chairs, a sad plant or two. Ibra Ake, a writer on the show, dropped by and said, "This feels like a trap house." Glover grinned and said, "It basically is."

Glover and Hiro Murai crisscrossed the hall, supervising episodes, tidying the seeming aimlessness and spritzing in ambiguity. One morning, they watched a cut of the season premiere, "Alligator Man." Uncle Willy—the alligator's owner, a has-been musician a little too comfortable in his bathrobe—is played indelibly by the comedian Katt Williams, who'd been enduring a rough career patch when Glover hired him for the role. "Katt's the shit," Glover said to Murai. "I told him, 'I'm going to try to get you an Emmy for this.' He said, 'Aight, we'll see. You the only nigga who can say that right now.'"

Murai said, "Good on you for holding on to that vision. They were all saying, 'When's the last time you saw Katt Williams not in jail?'"

Glover sat on the couch, stone-faced, wearing a stately brown cardigan and his straw hat, as everyone else in the room cracked up repeatedly and then tranced out to Uncle Willy's alligator. Glover told me that his approach to editing was "to force the eating of the whole cake." In one sequence, as Darius describes the mythic newspaper-headline figure known as Florida Man, we see a montage of his berserk acts. Glover said, "It was important to me that we see him shooting an unarmed black teen first, that you get the sting of that before we see him beating a flamingo to death, which is just funny."

The episode was twenty-nine and a half minutes, well above the customary twenty-four or so. "Just send it in and see what happens," Glover said. "FX will tell us what they want to cut, and we'll say no." He asked to see the opening montage again. As aerial tracking shots of parking lots and dilapidated houses and playgrounds rolled past, he nodded along to the soundtrack, a trap song by Jay Critch called "Did It Again." "It has that Tay-K feel," he said approvingly, referring to the jailed teen-ager, whose music he had laid in later in the episode.

The second season takes its name from the pre-holiday period known in Atlanta as "robbin' season." Darius explains the etymology to Earn in the first episode: "Christmas approaches, and everybody's got to eat." The show's aperture widens this year—each main character is the

focus of his or her own episode, and several new characters come and go—but, if Season 1 was a dream, Season 2 is a nightmare. Referring to a moment when one old friend robs another, Glover said, “That scene is so sad to me. That’s what it is when you’re at the bottom—there’s a knife between you, and whoever doesn’t pick up the knife is going to die.”

After lunch, Glover returned to an editing suite and sat on the floor, surrounded by his team, to watch the episode where Van and Earn go German. It played in near-silence: an early cut had stripped out the dialogue that established why the couple were going to the festival, as well as the stoned byplay that established that they had something together. The absences made the episode a creepy, cryptic Walpurgisnacht; it felt, in its exaggerated distillation of the show’s most distinctive qualities, almost like a parody.

As the producers paused the playback and discussed how to make the episode more enjoyable—how to make it more TV—Ibra Ake eyed the shot onscreen: a reveller wearing what the script called an “innocent child face” mask, whose “black eyeholes peer into Earn’s soul.” It looked more uncanny than innocent. “I feel like people are going to be writing essays twenty years from now on all the masks in the show,” Ake said. Glover rolled his neck, anticipating the treasure hunt: “Starting with why Earn is wearing a white mask.”

Glover had told me, “I’m trying to make my work more and more accessible. Christianity is super accessible.” But there’s little redemption in “Robbin’ Season.” In the first episode, Earn—trying to fit in at Alfred’s place, in the hope that he can crash there for a while—pulls out a gold-plated gun that Uncle Willy gave him. Alfred and Darius convulse with laughter. Then a friend of Alfred’s named Tracy comes in and says, “You better get rid of that gun, nigga!” The way Tracy plops down on Alfred’s couch makes it clear that he’s living with Alfred now, too—which puts Earn back out in the cold.

Months earlier, Hiro Murai had told me, “There aren’t any couch moments in this season, but I’m trying to build one in. That’s the only place where Earn gets a small win.” He managed one late in the season—a reunion on the discarded couch outside—and, he said, “I



*“This is the one, guys. This is the suit I’m going to get divorced in.”*

think it’s going to feel really good.” However, Glover told me, “The couch moment is definitely not like ‘Ahh, we’re all back together.’” He addressed the imagined audience: “Stop being nostalgic! Because I didn’t grow up with Santa Claus, people always tell me, ‘I feel sorry for you.’ I feel sorry for *you*, because you were lied to your whole life, and now you have to repeat the lie about Santa Claus to your kids every Christmas to feel whole. The truth is you’re definitely going to die alone.” He smiled faintly, relenting: “I know, I get it—the couch is what makes it a TV show. Just like you need Christmas. Otherwise it’s all random chaos and the story doesn’t make sense.”

There are limits even to Glover’s powers of invention. “The ‘Atlanta’ story has been told a bajillion times,” he acknowledged. “‘Boyz n the Hood,’ ‘The Godfather’—they’re all the same story.” I suggested that you could even see the setup of “Atlanta” as “Seinfeld,” except that the George character—the butt of the joke—is at the center. Glover said, “Sure, it’s black ‘Seinfeld.’ You’ve got the kooky guy, the guy who’s trying to make it, the neurotic dude, and the carefree ex. But it’s not *just* that.” He continued, wearily, “There are so few stories available to us, though. That’s why I’m not going to be making music much longer, and ‘Atlanta’ won’t interest me much longer. Best-case scenario, the show is just a show that

makes people aware. It’s not going to do the transformative work we’ve been talking about.”

Dan Harmon told me, “Donald is no longer in love with everything about the world. But I’ve never said to him, ‘You seem sad or darker now,’ because, for all I know, that’s growth.” Glover said that, as he’d grown, he’d realized that being a savior was impossible to reconcile with being an artist. “Everyone’s been trying to turn me into their woke bae”—millennial slang for an enlightened boyfriend. “But that’s not what I am. I’m fucked up, too—and that’s where the good shit comes from.”

Glover positioned his straw hat, poised for departure. “In another universe,” he said, “there might be a doppelgänger Donald who wears a cowboy hat. But I’ve decided to experience the loop in this form. It’s a very complex level of energy compared to a giraffe, or a metal alloy. I do think I’ll go back to a stasis state at some point, and it might not be that long from now.” He went on, reassuringly, “I wouldn’t want anyone to feel bad. It’ll be like I was at a big party, and everyone’s enjoying themselves, wandering around—and suddenly you all start going, ‘Where’s Donald?’” He acted out the concerned partygoers: “‘Where’d he go?’ ‘I saw him, I talked to him!’ ‘He was just here a little while ago!’” And then the collective shrug: “‘Oh, well, I guess he slipped out.’” ♦

# THE AFTERLIFE OF PABLO ESCOBAR

*In Colombia, a drug lord's posthumous celebrity brings profits and controversy.*

BY JON LEE ANDERSON

When Roberto Escobar was the head accountant for the Medellín cartel, in the nineteen-eighties, he handled billions of dollars a year—so much cash that he sometimes resorted to stuffing it in plastic bags and burying it in the countryside. Known as El Osito, or Little Bear, he was the older brother of the narco-trafficker Pablo Escobar, who was then among the richest men in the world, responsible for a drug-smuggling empire that extended from Colombia to a dozen other countries. Although Roberto was never as extravagant as his brother, he was accustomed to flying on private jets, and sent his children to a Swiss boarding school. Once, during an extended hike through the forest to elude capture, he threw a briefcase containing a hundred thousand dollars into a river, because it was heavy.

These days, Roberto Escobar, having served fourteen years in prison, earns money by leading tourists around one of his family's former safe houses. The house, a bungalow of white painted brick, can be reached by a gated driveway off a steep mountain road, roughly halfway between the Envigado plateau, where Pablo Escobar grew up, and the middle-class neighborhood in Medellín where he was gunned down by Colombian police, in 1993. One recent morning, a group of visitors from the United States and Europe arrived in a chauffeured van—part of a growing influx of *narco-turistas*, who come to see the places where Pablo Escobar lived and worked. Roberto, seventy-one, still looked like an accountant; he wore khakis, a blue short-sleeved shirt, and thick-rimmed spectacles. While he was in prison, a letter bomb delivered to his cell exploded, leaving him blind in his right eye and deaf in his right ear. His damaged eye was a milky blue, and he periodically squirted drops of medicine into it.

Roberto was a gruff tour guide, hus-

tlung guests from room to room, but his visitors seemed too awestruck to complain. An exterior wall was speckled with ragged bullet holes, the result of a kidnapping attempt. Inside, a Jet Ski—supposedly one that Roger Moore used in a James Bond film—sat near a photograph of Escobar driving it across bright-blue water. Beneath a writing desk in the living room, Escobar lifted a plank to reveal a hidden compartment. “We could fit two million dollars there,” he said, then peremptorily dropped the plank. In the dining room, he pointed to an oil painting of a brown stallion, a racehorse named Earthquake. Angrily, he recounted how enemies had stolen the horse from him and returned it castrated. Shaking his head, he said, “No act of violence is justified.”

In 2014, Roberto founded a holding company, Escobar, Inc., to license the family name. But he is a minor player in a growing industry. An increasing number of people who knew Pablo Escobar—employees, relatives, and enemies—are trying to sell versions of his epic life and death, encouraging a cottage industry of books, television shows, and documentaries. Along with the narcotours that operate out of Medellín, there are souvenir vendors selling Escobar baseball caps, ashtrays, mugs, and key rings; Escobar T-shirts are displayed next to soccer jerseys and Pope Francis memorabilia.

In the past few years, Hollywood has examined his story in a series of films: “Escobar: Paradise Lost” (Benicio Del Toro; innocent surfer drawn into drug web), “The Infiltrator” (Bryan Cranston; double agent), “Loving Pablo” (Penélope Cruz and Javier Bardem; clandestine romance with kingpin), and “American Made” (Tom Cruise; pilot turns Escobar crony turns informant). The depiction most responsible for the tourist boom is the Netflix series “Narcos,” in which the Brazilian actor Wag-

ner Moura plays Escobar as both psychopath and doting family man—a Latin American Tony Soprano. Netflix does not disclose viewership numbers, but the audience for the show, which will launch its fourth season this year, has been estimated at three million. In 2016, Escobar, Inc., sent a letter to Netflix, demanding reparations for appropriating the family story; in a subsequent interview with the *Hollywood Reporter*, Roberto said that if he wasn't paid a billion dollars he would “close their little show.” (Escobar and Netflix declined to comment on the possibility of a settlement.)

No one disputes that Pablo Escobar was a murderer, a torturer, and a kidnapper. But he was loved by many in Medellín, and, increasingly, he is an object of fascination abroad. At his zenith, he was the most notorious outlaw on the planet, with control of some eighty per cent of the cocaine entering the U.S. and of a fortune estimated at three billion dollars. In many respects, he remains Colombia's most famous citizen, a charismatic entrepreneur of boundless ambition who delighted in his Robin Hood image, even as he killed thousands of people to subvert the government. In Colombia, his legacy touches nearly everyone, but few people agree on whether his story should be seen as entertainment or as a cautionary tale.

At the end of the tour, Roberto posed for selfies with visitors and autographed photos of Escobar, along with copies of his memoir, a slim volume titled “My Brother Pablo.” (“My mother still recalls that, from the time he was a little boy, Pablo used to tell her, ‘I want to be a lawyer and have a good car.’”) The tourists handed payments to a group of wolfish young men who served as Roberto's assistants. Before I left, I asked him why his brother continued to inspire people around the world. “It's because Pablo helped the poorest people of this country,” he replied. It was a kind





*Once the world's most notorious outlaw, Pablo Escobar is now commemorated in books, TV shows, tours, and souvenirs.*

of catechism; he did not explain further. When I asked if his brother was a good man, he shrugged and said, "To me he was."

In the old city center of Medellín is a street of funeral parlors. On a bright morning, I went there to meet Jesús Correa, an employee at one of the funeral homes and one of the first people to appreciate the mythic quality of Escobar's life.

Correa, an amiable man of sixty-three, was bald and corpulent, and dressed in a gray suit, a pink shirt, and a burgundy tie. He took me for a walk, and, two blocks from the funeral home, we came to an open-air café, painted bright yellow and orange, where men sat drinking beer and watching soccer on television. "Here is where it all began," Correa said. In the early seventies, the café was called Las Dos Tortugas—the Two Turtles—and it was a favored meeting place for robbers and smugglers. A dropout from Medellín's Universidad Autónoma, Escobar had gone into business selling stolen tombstones and contraband American cigarettes. He began hanging out with the crowd at Las Dos Tortugas, coming and going on a Lambretta motorbike. Colombia's drug trade was flourishing, although in those days it was mostly marijuana, which the locals called *marimba*. Escobar found his niche as the U.S. cocaine market began to take off.

Correa ran his own hustle out of the funeral home, which was owned by a friend: he bought contraband French perfume from a contact in Panama, then sold it in Medellín. One day, one of Escobar's *pistoleros*—low-level shooters—summoned him to Las Dos Tortugas and asked if he could get Cartier and Chanel. When Correa assured him he could, the *pistolero* gave him an order. After that, the gangsters started buying perfume for their girlfriends, and Correa became known as El Perfumero.

Correa took pleasure in associating with men who had monikers like Filth and Spider. The cartel's *sicarios*, or hit men, operated out of an oil-change shop not far from the funeral home; a group of more than a hundred gathered there

to plot killings, kidnappings, and bombings. Some were policemen, who came to change out of their uniforms and then attack their colleagues. Correa was fascinated, and gradually he became a welcome visitor. "Why did I do it?" he said. "Out of prurient interest, I think, pure and simple. As a boy, I read a book about the Untouchables of Eliot Ness, and I was magnetized by the Chicago gangsters of the time—Al Capone, Pretty Boy Floyd, John Dillinger, Machine Gun Kelly. With the criminals I was getting to know here, I thought, One day I'll write a book. My friends warned me that I would be dead within six months."

One day, he recalled, some Escobar men began discussing a murder they were planning. "I got up, as if to leave the room, but one of them said, 'Stay. We trust you.' I stayed." Correa realized that he had crossed a line. "I'm a big reader of World War Two histories," he said. "And something I've always noticed is that, for those who were in the concentration camps, a moment comes when they became accustomed to everything going on around them." Correa waved to the streets around us. "I mean, I suffered over what was happening, the violence. But the morbid curiosity—you know, it was like Alka-Seltzer. I felt something here, inside me." Correa made an itching motion with his fingers around his stomach, and smiled.

When Escobar began to establish himself as a public figure, in the early eighties, he found other people willing to tell his story without judgment. In April, 1983, the weekly magazine *Semana* published an article titled "Un Robin Hood Paisa." (*Paisa* is the local term for the people of Antioquia province, which contains Medellín.) *Semana* described Escobar as a politically ambitious and civic-minded thirty-three-year-old businessman who owned an immense private ranch and a fleet of helicopters and airplanes. The magazine evaded questions about the origin of Escobar's fortune, saying only that it was "the subject of widespread speculation."

Escobar had recently mounted a campaign for Congress, in which he spent freely in Medellín's poorer neighborhoods. He had initially tried to join a

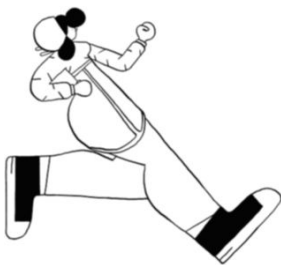
branch of Colombia's mainstream Liberal Party, led by a popular young politician named Luis Carlos Galán, but he was thwarted when Galán denounced him as a mafioso. Escobar, undaunted, joined a different branch of the Party, with the help of a powerful, corrupt senator named Alberto Santofimio.

Escobar made it to Congress, and began working to build a political constituency in and around Medellín. "His civic vocation seems to know no limits," *Semana* gushed. "His civic works include entire neighborhoods, football fields, lighting systems, reforestation programs, donations of tractors, bulldozers, etc. At the moment he is moving forward with a program to build a thousand homes on a giant lot he owns. He bought it with the idea of building a neighborhood to relocate hundreds of poor families from the slums of Medellín, and he's already given jobs to some in his construction firm."

For anyone looking, though, the real reasons for Escobar's interest in politics were clear. "His main political preoccupation right now is the extradition of Colombians," *Semana* said. "For him, this treaty, whereby Colombians who reside in their own country but who have issues in the United States can be handed over to the authorities of that country, constitutes 'a violation of national sovereignty.'"

His electoral ambitions did not go very far. He was soon denounced as a gangster by Colombia's justice minister, Rodrigo Lara Bonilla. Escobar fought back, falsely accusing the minister of being in the pocket of narcos. But then an influential newspaper editor named Guillermo Cano dug up an old news story showing that Escobar had been arrested, seven years before, for the possession of thirty-nine pounds of cocaine. Escobar was ejected from Congress, and the F.B.I. began investigating him. He went underground, and a long hunt began.

In March, 1984, Colombian and American agents raided the cartel's headquarters. Known as Tranquilandia, it was a huge complex that contained at least seven laboratories, various airstrips, and more than a billion dollars' worth of cocaine. A month later, Escobar had his revenge, when two of his men, riding a motorbike, ambushed



Lara Bonilla's car in Bogotá, killing him instantly.

Escobar spent seven years as a fugitive, but his concern was less the Colombian justice system than the United States Drug Enforcement Administration. To force the state to withdraw from its extradition treaty with the U.S., he and his partners offered bounties on judges and prosecutors, in warnings that were signed "The Extraditables." The cartel's *sicarios* killed thousands of people, including more than two hundred and fifty policemen in Medellín. In 1986, his men murdered Cano, and they machine-gunned his old political enemy Luis Carlos Galán at a Presidential-campaign appearance in 1989. Many civilians were also killed, including the hundred and seven passengers and crew of an Avianca plane that Escobar had ordered blown up, in 1989, because he believed—wrongly, it turned out—that another uncoöperative politician was on board. To force the government to negotiate, he abducted prominent Colombians, many of them journalists, including the daughter of a former President. Escobar's guiding principle was *plata o plomo*, meaning silver or lead—either you took his money or you got a bullet.

Another Netflix series, the sixty-part "Surviving Escobar," is based on a memoir by Jhon Jairo (Popeye) Velásquez, one of Escobar's top *sicarios*. Since completing a twenty-three-year prison sentence, in 2014, Popeye has taken advantage of Escobar's resurgent glamour. In addition to the Netflix series, he has a YouTube show, "Repentant Popeye," in which he films himself telling stories from the old days, commenting on the news, insulting his enemies ("despicable rats!"), and haranguing soccer managers who don't meet his expectations. Despite the show's name, Popeye doesn't seem very repentant. He frequently expresses admiration for Escobar, whom he calls El Patrón, and cheerfully acknowledges his crimes; he admits to having murdered more than two hundred and fifty people, including several leading politicians, and to having helped orchestrate the killings of some three thousand more. For the many Colombians who are ashamed to be associated with Escobar's memory, Popeye's brazenness is infuriating. His fans love it. The YouTube show

has some six hundred thousand subscribers, mostly young, right-wing men.

I met Popeye at his apartment, on the top floor of a newly built red brick tower, in a gentrifying neighborhood of Medellín. A slim, youthful man in his mid-fifties, with short-cropped silver hair and a camera-ready smile, he wore jeans and a black T-shirt, and his neck and arms were tattooed. Both of his forearms bore the phrase "El General de la Mafia," surrounded by skeletons and death's heads.

The apartment had the feeling of a studio set. In the living room, a large window looked out on an adjacent apartment tower, and a camera on a tripod was placed near it. On the walls, an oil painting showed two cocks fighting against a black backdrop; another depicted an army of sperm breaking into eggs. Between them hung a number of masks, of the kind used in sadomasochistic rituals, including a replica of the one that Hannibal Lecter wore in "The Silence of the Lambs." Popeye explained that he liked them because they reminded him of death, and "death is part of life."

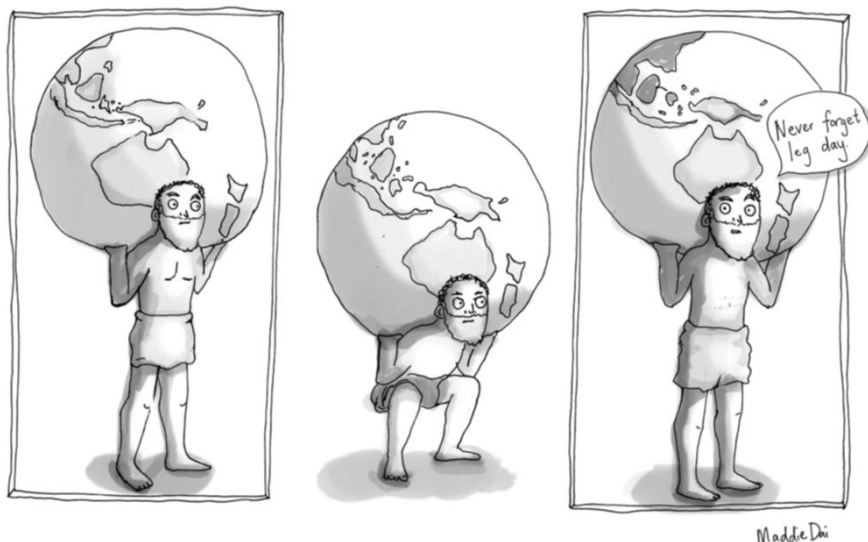
The *narcoturistas* are coming to Colombia in part because the country is experiencing unusual stability, after decades of vicious fighting. In 2016, the government, led by President Juan Manuel Santos, signed a peace treaty with the Marxist guerrilla army known as the FARC, ending a half-century insurgency. Popeye wanted no part of it. "There'll never be peace here in Colombia," he

said. In his view, Santos was "a professional traitor," and the treaty threatened Colombia's integrity by allowing Communists to run for office.

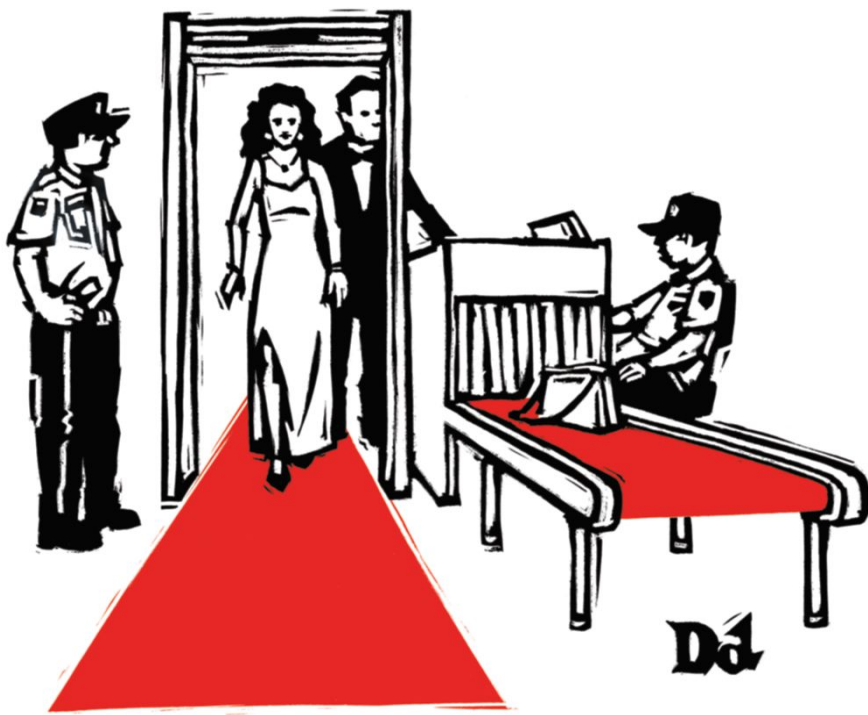
Popeye was not opposed to violence. He was happy to acknowledge that Escobar, trying to cultivate allies to fight against rival criminal groups, had helped form a string of brutal right-wing paramilitaries; he spoke warmly of the former President Álvaro Uribe Vélez, who has frequently been accused of aiding the paramilitaries' work. (In a declassified 1991 Defense Intelligence document, Uribe also was named as a collaborator of Escobar's. Uribe denies the accusations. However, his brother is on trial for leading a terror group, and numerous associates of his have been imprisoned for similar crimes.) "We need an ultra-right-wing government here to stop Colombia from succumbing to Communism," Popeye declared. He gestured toward the mountains ringing Medellín—a stronghold of paramilitaries—and said, "There are already fifteen thousand armed men in these mountains. The day the FARC takes power, we'll become two hundred thousand, and, if we include the cities, altogether we'll be five hundred thousand. It'll be financed by industrialists, and the combustible ingredient to all of this will be cocaine." He saw himself as a key player in this future war, calling himself "the most experienced Colombian" in matters of violence.

He had killed innocent people, he

## ATLAS REMEMBERS LEG DAY







said, and cut victims into pieces, but had done so because his enemies had done that to his people, too. Anyway, in those days it had been his job. He had been fighting what he thought was a war against a corrupt state and its extradition treaty with the United States. How did he sleep at night? By getting in bed, pulling up the covers, and closing his eyes. He didn't have time, he said, to *andar con maricadas*—to mess around with fairy shit.

Popeye complained that he had done his time and had helped prosecutors with investigations, but still the authorities interfered with his efforts to make a living, through his books and films. On his YouTube show, he claims that the police frequently stop him to ask questions about being involved in the cocaine trade. "Look around," he said. "I live simply. My apartment is nothing fancy, and my car is ordinary."

In December, 2016, he appeared in a video wielding a semi-automatic pistol and telling his followers, "Hello, warriors. I'm here in the streets of my beloved Medellín. I found my beautiful 9-millimetre Pietro Beretta. We're testing it—we're firing it. It's a doll, a beauty." Popeye complained that Medellín's mayor had made a fuss, despite the fact that it was a stunt gun. Popeye stood

and retrieved the gun, and, holding it by the barrel, he handed it to me. It was heavy, and looked real. "See?" he said. Understanding that he meant to demonstrate that the gun was fake, I pointed the pistol at his cockfight painting and pulled the trigger. The apartment exploded with the bang. Popeye looked startled, and went to the door and opened it. The hallway was empty. "Where are the neighbors?" he said. "Not a soul. I could be murdered here and nobody would come." I told him that I didn't entirely blame his neighbors. Popeye laughed.

Before I left, Popeye took a moment to endorse his latest production: an Internet-only film called "X Sicario Professional," about a man who is released from prison and has to return to his city and take out the mafia don. He autographed a DVD copy for me. Knowing that I planned to see the mayor, he dedicated another to him, and asked me to give it to him on his behalf.

Since becoming mayor, in 2016, Federico Gutiérrez has waged a campaign to reject what he calls "the past"—the legacy of narcotrafficking and violence. At the peak of Escobar's rampage, Medellín was the murder capital of the world, with more than six thou-

sand homicides in 1991. In the past two decades, it has transformed itself, with significant investments in public transport, including a cable car that links the hillside slums to the city center, and a revamped downtown, with a botanical garden, a concert area, and an interactive science museum for children. Many of the city's slums, called *comunas*, are still controlled by gangs, but security has improved; last year, there were five hundred and seventy-seven murders. For the Mayor, understandably, Popeye represents a public-relations problem.

Gutiérrez met me at his office downtown. A slender man of forty-three, he wears his hair long, in the manner of a soccer player, and favors jeans and dress shirts with the top button loose. Politically, he is right of center. Gutiérrez grimaced when I told him I had met Popeye, and said, "Everything we are doing today to fight against narcotrafficking is because of what they did in the eighties." He had grown up during the violence, and still marvelled at the turnaround. "This is no longer the city of Pablo Escobar," Gutiérrez declared. "This is the city Pablo Escobar tried, but failed, to destroy." When I gave Gutiérrez his dedicated copy of "X Sicario," he looked disgusted and handed it back to me, holding it with two fingers as if it were contagious. "I can't accept this," he said. "Seeing Popeye back on the street is an offense to society and to his victims. But these are the laws."

Last March, the American rapper Wiz Khalifa, in Medellín for a concert, visited Escobar's grave; later, he posted on Instagram images of himself smoking a joint at the tomb, along with the message "Smokin wit Pablo." Gutiérrez had gone on television to call the rapper a *sinvergüenza*—a shameless ruffian—and to say that he should have brought flowers to Escobar's victims instead. Later, Wiz Khalifa posted an apology on Instagram, saying, "Didn't mean to offend anyone with my personal activities. . . . Peace and love." Still, Gutiérrez could barely contain himself at the memory. "We have to stop the narcoculture," he said. "Wiz Khalifa thought he could come here and make an apologia for crime but found out that he couldn't."

Gutiérrez told me that he and his team were fighting to reclaim Medellín's story. "If you don't tell your history

yourself, others will tell it for you," he said. Soon he would be inaugurating a new exhibit at the city's Museum of Memory, "to show the victims' side of the story," Gutiérrez said. "We're not going to conceal the true history, but we don't want those who did so much harm to be able to show themselves off as heroes. The real heroes are their victims. We want to be a symbol of what happened—a city that collapsed but got to its feet again." When I mentioned that I had been on Roberto Escobar's tour, Gutiérrez blanched, and said, "We'll also do a tour—an official tour."

The unofficial tours frequently stop at the Monaco Building, an eight-story brutalist apartment tower of reinforced concrete, in the affluent Poblado district, that Escobar built for his family. In 1988, his rivals in the Cali drug cartel placed a powerful car bomb outside the Monaco; Escobar's mother, wife, and children were inside the tower, and though they sustained no serious injuries, they fled and did not return. Gutiérrez said that he planned to demolish the building and create a park in its place. He'd needed to win over the Medellín police, who had wanted to refurbish it as an intelligence headquarters. Gutiérrez told me that he was waiting for one last signature. When he got it, he said, he would invite me to watch the demolition.

In a gruesome scene from the first season of "Narcos," Escobar murders two trafficking partners, whom he suspects of withholding money. He kills the first one by beating him to death with a pool cue; when he is finished, his face and clothing spattered with blood, his men beat the other one to death. The story on which the scene is based is hardly less gruesome. According to Popeye's testimony, the two victims, Fernando Galeano and Gerardo Moncada, were shot, cut into pieces, and incinerated in a fire pit.

Both the imagined scene and the real killings took place in La Catedral, the prison where Escobar was held after striking a deal to turn himself in, in 1991. An unused drug-rehabilitation center that was renovated to house Escobar, La Catedral occupied a secluded spot on the forested edges of the Envigado plateau, with spectacular views of Medellín. In the deal, Escobar agreed to spend a few years there, in exchange for the gov-

ernment's commitment not to extradite him to the United States. The prison did little to restrain him; his *sicarios* served as guards, and he remained involved in the cocaine trade. The key intermediary for his surrender was Rafael García Herreros, an octogenarian priest who had previously accepted Escobar's gift of a "very beautiful hacienda" on behalf of his church, and had gone on television to insist that he had done nothing wrong. "When one fulfills the will of God, there is no corruption," he said.

The road to La Catedral is winding and steep, full of switchbacks and narrow bridges that hang over mountain streams. On the morning of my visit, clouds obscured the valley, and everything was damp. La Catedral, at the top, is now a charitable home for elderly people, run by a Benedictine abbot, Elkin Ramiro Vélez García. On the exterior wall, a billboard-size photograph shows the place as it was in Escobar's day; a picture of him, wearing a Russian fur hat, bears the caption "He who does not know his history is condemned to repeat it."

In the main plaza—a parklike area with naïve mosaic murals—several dozen residents warmed themselves in the morning sun. Others drank coffee in a cheerful mess hall, adorned with mounted bull's heads and old Coca-Cola advertisements. The visible remnants of the prison were set back, at the edges of the forest. There was what remained of Escobar's bedroom—a concrete pad, overgrown with jungle—and two guard towers. A large brick structure, once a video arcade for Escobar's men, had been repurposed as an administration building. The plaza had once been a soccer field, where Escobar played with his men.

Father Elkin, a clean-shaven man in his early fifties, wearing a black soutane and a large crucifix, waved me into his office next to the mess hall. He said that Escobar—Pablo, as he called him—had chosen the site for his prison because he knew it well: it was an area where he used to have people killed and their bodies disposed of. "He did many, many, many bad things here," Father Elkin said. "But he also did wonderful things." This was a tendentious view but not an uncommon one, especially in Escobar's early years. The *Semana* story had spoken of his "desire to be the country's

number one benefactor." Old comrades told me that they were attracted by his professed commitment to building a "Medellín without slums." Popeye insisted that Escobar "was really a socialist—he just had a different kind of socialism in mind, where everyone would have his own little car, his own little house." He had paid for the construction of a neighborhood that became known as Barrio Pablo Escobar: five hundred houses and several soccer fields.

After he was pushed out of Congress, though, his largesse became a more direct exchange of money for influence. His bribes went to police officers and judges, but also to residents of the *comunas*. Father Elkin recalled that once, on a soccer field in a nearby community called El Dorado, he'd watched Escobar hand out money to the poor. "He did many things for those who were helped by no one else, and he did so always in the company of the Church. The priest would go to see Pablo and always leave with his briefcase full. Was this evil? We would have to define evil to decide that." He raised his voice, as if speaking from the pulpit: "The Church has also done bad, bad things in the name of God! It will be God who judges us."

Father Elkin said that Popeye—"a very good friend of mine"—came frequently to La Catedral, bringing tourists and a crew of bodyguards. Most of the narcotours were "pure silliness," he said. "The guides tell the tourists anything that comes into their heads. For instance, I made an outdoor oven to incinerate the diapers of the old folks. Then I found out the guides were telling their tourists that it was where Pablo burned people!" He shook his head. "Popeye, on the other hand, tells his tourists the truth. For example, he talks about the *asado de los Moncada*"—the Moncada barbecue. When Escobar's men burned the bodies of Moncada and Galeano, they arranged to have a barbecue the same evening, to disguise the smoke and the smell.

The killings, it turned out, helped dislodge Escobar from his comfortable imprisonment. When the visitors did not return from La Catedral, rumors spread that Escobar had killed them. A few weeks later, in July, 1992, the government attempted to move Escobar to a more secure facility, and he escaped in the process. For more than a year, he was

pursued by a coalition of his enemies: the D.E.A. and the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command; a Colombian police team called the Search Bloc; and a death squad of criminal rivals that called itself Los Pepes—short for People Persecuted by Pablo Escobar.

On December 2, 1993, police traced a phone call between Escobar and his son, Juan Pablo, to a safe house in the Los Pinos neighborhood of Medellín. Colombian special forces swooped in. Escobar was killed at the house, felled by three bullets as he stood on its red tiled roof. He was bearded and barefoot, in jeans; a photograph circulated of him lying face down, his belly spilling out of a blue polo shirt. The Colombian artist Fernando Botero, noted for his fleshy, whimsical portrayals of people and animals, reimagined the scene in a heroic oil painting. “The Death of Pablo Escobar” shows him standing on the rooftop with gun in hand, while bullets whiz around him, like insects pestering a giant. It hangs in the Museo de Antioquia, in downtown Medellín.

It is an item of faith among Escobar’s family members that he killed himself before the authorities could get to him. Father Elkin wasn’t even convinced that Escobar had really died. “If you ask me whether Pablo is dead, I would say I don’t believe he is,” he said. “He was a sagacious, astute man.” He waved his arms around, as if to suggest that Escobar could be anywhere, still in hiding. He said that Popeye had told him that there were still bodies buried around La Catedral, in graves dug on his orders. (Popeye denies this.) Some of the elderly residents believed that La Catedral was haunted, Father Elkin said. They had seen and heard things. “Ghosts?” I asked. “Not ghosts—*spirits*,” he clarified. They had appeared to him, too. Sometimes they tapped him on the shoulder.

**I**n Medellín’s Montesacro cemetery, I found a fresh bouquet of pastel-colored flowers in a vase next to Escobar’s tomb. The family plot is situated in a prominent spot next to the chapel, and flanked by graceful cypresses. On a slab of black marble, gold script spelled

out “Pablo Emilio Escobar Gaviria, December 1, 1949–December 2, 1993.” El Patrón had turned forty-four the day before his death. His parents were buried alongside him, as was his bodyguard Limón, who was with him when he died.

Two young men stood quietly in front of Escobar’s tomb, occasionally murmuring in French. At last, one of them walked to a marble bench opposite the tomb and sat in a pose of reverent contemplation. I was reminded of a YouTube video of Popeye paying homage to Escobar after he got out of prison. He knelt in front of the tomb, his eyes closed, like a choirboy about to receive the Sacrament.

Colombians have spent decades trying to reconcile the ecstatic remembrances of Escobar with the mayhem he produced. In 1993, the novelist Gabriel García Márquez began grappling with his legacy in “News of a Kidnapping.” The book told the stories of the Colombians Escobar had abducted, as he tried to force the government to disallow his extradition. García Márquez described Escobar as a monstrous Pied Piper: “At the height of his splendor, people put up altars with his picture and lit candles to him in the slums of Medellín. It was believed he could perform miracles. No Colombian in history ever possessed or exercised a talent like his for shaping public opinion. And none had a greater power to corrupt. The most unsettling and danger-

ous aspect of his personality was his total inability to distinguish between good and evil.”

After Escobar’s death, the journalist Alonso Salazar set out to write a biography that would deflate the legend. In 2001, after several years of interviews with Escobar’s relatives, friends, and enemies, he published “The Pablo Parable.” Where García Márquez had suggested that Escobar had subjected Colombia to a kind of national hypnosis, Salazar suggested that he had merely been a conduit for the country’s bigotry and violent impulses. “The Escobar story calls into question Colombia’s entire society—its political and economic elites, and the armed forces—as to the coherence of our state and our

capacity to build a nation where it is possible for everyone to live dignified lives,” he wrote. “It’s also a questioning of the international community, especially the United States, for its deceit in maintaining a war, the so-called war against drugs, which has . . . created criminality and destruction of life and nature that is beyond any precedent.”

Salazar later entered politics, serving as mayor of Medellín from 2008 to 2011, and was involved in many of the city’s recent reforms. One evening, I met him at his home to discuss Escobar’s legacy. “There is a resurrection of Escobar,” he lamented, and he wondered if he had been partly to blame. His book about Escobar had been adapted for a television series, “El Patrón del Mal,” which began airing in 2012 and attracted obsessive fans across Latin America. “The series is balanced,” he said. “It shows the victims, too, and the generals who fought Escobar. But I don’t think that’s what the public watched it for. They watched it to see Escobar.”

When Salazar signed over the rights, he felt confident that the producers would not glamorize Escobar. One of them, Camilo Cano, was the son of the murdered newspaper editor; the other, Juana Uribe, was the daughter of a former Escobar hostage and a niece of a murdered politician. Still, the portrait of Escobar was ambivalent, and some viewers were offended. At a panel discussion in 2013, Uribe recalled, “A woman once asked me, ‘Why did you portray Pablo Escobar as loving with his children?’ And I told her, ‘Because that’s how psychopaths are: loving with their kids—and murderers.’ And we need to understand that, if we’re going to stop falling in love with psychopaths.” She insisted that she had not wanted to make Escobar a hero. “Escobar kidnapped my mother, killed my uncle.” But, she said, “a person that was able to do what Escobar did has also a normal face. And people have to learn that that’s the way people are, they have two sides.”

Uribe bemoaned the appeal of anti-heroes: “People love bandits, no matter what we do.” (As if to confirm her point, Popeye told me about his youthful fascination with “Scarface,” in which Al Pacino plays a Cuban immigrant who becomes a cocaine kingpin. “That was the life we wanted to live!” he exclaimed.)





But “El Patrón del Mal” made it clear that, in a profoundly unequal country, Escobar represented a form of economic mobility. “When there are no regular paths to get out of where you are, the bandit is the one who makes it—the one who can jump ahead,” Uribe said. He also appealed to a perverse sense of patriotism. The oath of Los Extraditables—“Better a tomb in Colombia than a cell in the United States”—resonated with Latin Americans sensitive about Yankee intervention.

“El Patrón del Mal” joined a wave of *narconovelas*—soap operas featuring drug traffickers—that are notably less concerned with ethical implications. One of the first, “Without Tits, You Don’t Get to Heaven,” revolves around a young woman, Catalina, who tries to make her way out of poverty by becoming a prostitute for narcos, getting breast implants to make herself more desirable. Despite the hand-wringing of politicians and journalists, the shows have resonated with people who have little faith in the state. As the Fordham anthropologist O. Hugo Benavides has written, “Narconovelas set up an alternative moral political structure in which the state, government, politicians, law enforcement, bureaucrats, and soldiers are seldom portrayed as the good guys. The heroes are always either Lone Ranger types or misunderstood (and sometimes conflicted) drug dealers.”

“Narcos” avoids questions of culpability by narrating everything from the American perspective: the protagonist is not Escobar but the D.E.A. agents pursuing him. During the first season, Omar Rincón, a professor of media studies at Bogotá’s University of the Andes, wrote a scornful review. The show, he said, presented a discomfitingly American vision of Colombians, “something like what Trump thinks we are: the good ones are the gringos in the D.E.A. And the narcos are comic misfits and tasteless throwbacks.” Even the accents weren’t right, he complained. For Colombians, he said, it was impossible to identify with the narrative. “The story makes heroes of those that Latin Americans consider villains: the D.E.A. agents. Which, in addition to being silly, goes against reality. Gentlemen of Netflix: know that the villains are the ones in the D.E.A.”

Escobar’s death ended the second



*“I’ll go in and look at stuff, but I won’t read any signage.”*

season of “Narcos,” but the show has continued; the third season followed the Cali cartel, and the fourth has moved to Mexico, which is now even more afflicted by drug violence than Colombia is. In September, a location scout named Carlos Muñoz Portal was found shot dead in his car outside Mexico City. It was unclear whether Muñoz’s murder was a coincidence or a drug cartel’s warning not to film in its territory; in any case, Netflix announced its intention to proceed with the production. Roberto Escobar suggested a solution to the producers: hire hit men to provide security.

On the twentieth anniversary of Escobar’s death, a group of mourners wearing white shirts gathered at his tomb. They were there to attend a “forgiveness Mass” arranged by his sister Luz María. After Escobar’s death, his wife and children immigrated to Argentina, but Luz María stayed, and, in the coming years, she organized several Masses to reconcile the Escobars with

victims and their families. This one was a success. She handed each of the mourners a symbolic seed—to help them “let forgiveness enter and grow in their hearts,” she said. A teen-age girl left a note at Escobar’s graveside: “I was told you did good things and bad things, but it doesn’t matter now. Rest in peace.”

One evening, I spoke to Luz María, in the food court of a luxury mall (near, as it happens, a restaurant where Pop-eye once arranged to have his own girlfriend murdered, on Pablo’s orders). She told me, “I have a slogan I always try and tell the media: ‘No to drugs, no to narco-trafficking, no to violence, and yes to forgiveness.’” In Colombia, which is nearly eighty per cent Catholic, the rhetoric of contrition can be potent. Father Elkin described Escobar as a profoundly devout man who was led astray by his ambitions. But when I asked Roberto Escobar whether he felt repentant for his crimes he said no. “It’s not important to be repentant,” he said. “I’m a believer.” (After the letter bomb, he said,

he'd experienced a particularly convincing vision of Christ.) Luz María told me that she still hoped Popeye would find his way. She had bumped into him after his release, offered him a blessing, and told him that God had given him a second chance. Father Elkin was more resigned about Popeye's prospects: "He comes to confess, and I take his confession. If he doesn't comply with his confession, that's his business."

In 2009, Escobar's son, Juan Pablo, released a documentary called "Sins of My Father," in which he tracked down victims of his father and apologized on behalf of his family. He has also reckoned with his father's memory in two memoirs, "Pablo Escobar: My Father," from 2014, and the untranslated "Pablo Escobar in Flagrante: The Things My Father Never Told Me," which was released in 2016. Just before Christmas, I had lunch with him in Guadalajara, Mexico, where he was promoting his latest book. Juan Pablo, who was sixteen years old when Escobar was killed, is now forty-one, a brooding, heavyset man with an unmistakable resemblance to his father; the image on the jacket of "In Flagrante" seamlessly melds their faces. He told me that he learned the truth about his family when he was seven, and Pablo Escobar told him bluntly, "I'm an outlaw." From then on,

they had a morning ritual in which his father read the newspaper and pointed out murders that had been attributed to him. Juan Pablo recalled, "He'd say, 'I didn't do that one,' and then, 'I did that one.'"

In Argentina, Juan Pablo worked as an architect, but in recent years he has made a second career of rehabilitating the family's reputation. His new book offers a twenty-eight-point list of what he calls falsehoods propagated by "Narcos." ("My father did not personally kill the person who is called Colonel 'Carrillo' in the series.") Over lunch, Juan Pablo told me about his work as a speaker, in which Mexican officials hire him to warn youngsters about the dangers of a criminal life style. He also owns a clothing line, Escobar Henao, whose mission statement declares, "Our garments are banners of peace." (One T-shirt includes the family name and the phrase "Enough will never be enough.") Alonso Salazar, the journalist and politician, told me, "He's very clever, and clearly he's been pondering the opportunities offered by this resurrection. He's living off the image of the father but realizes that he needs to be critical." At the restaurant, Juan Pablo excused himself to speak briefly with a producer about a movie project.

Before the family fled Colombia,

Juan Pablo opened a phone book and selected a new name, Sebastián Marroquín, which he maintained until 1999, when an Argentine police investigation into allegations of money-laundering revealed his identity. (He was held for six weeks, then released for lack of evidence.) When I asked which name he preferred, he shrugged and said it didn't matter. He would always be Pablo Escobar's son. "I live with permanent suspicion—I was born guilty," he complained. He noted bitterly that the United States government had refused him a visa for twenty-four years. "I want to be recognized as an individual," he said. "I know about everything my father did, and I will go to each and every one of the families of his victims to ask forgiveness. But I'm not legally culpable. My personal slogan is 'I inherited a mountain of shit. So what am I supposed to do with it?'"

Alonso Salazar told me that Pablo Escobar's legacy had profoundly altered political and social life. "Narco-trafficking came along and just overwhelmed everything," he said. "Escobar debuted the instruments of terror, and afterward everyone used them."

The Medellín cartel's ascent coincided with the collapse of Communism in Europe, which in turn helped end most of the socialist revolution in the hemisphere. After Escobar, the idea of rebellion based on ideology was largely supplanted by the remorseless pursuit of profit and power. In places along his supply chain—including Mexico and in Central America—the remnants of his operation have grown into insurgent gangs, and states have succumbed to corruption and internal conflict.

Escobar's cartel died with him, but, despite a U.S.-assisted war on narco-trafficking that has cost thousands of lives and more than nine billion dollars, international consumption has spread enormously, and the drug economy remains strong; last year, the United Nations reported that Colombia was the world's largest producer of cocaine. Five of the world's most dangerous cities are in Latin America, with much of the violence linked to the drug trade.

Father Elkin suggested that Escobar's greatest legacy was his story. "The country likes to say that it has forgotten



*"I told him to do that."*

Pablo Escobar, but it's not true," he told me. "Today's youth still see narco-trafficking as a way to make quick money. Society doesn't change, really. And those with the greatest responsibility for this—excuse me—are those in the media, with their television series and their books."

Omar Rincón, the media-studies professor, once wrote, "We live the culture of drug trafficking, in aesthetics, values, and references. We are a nation that took on the narco idea that anything goes if it will get you out of poverty: some tits, a weapon, corruption, trafficking coca, being a guerrilla or a paramilitary fighter, or being in government." He was careful to note that the narco aesthetic was not merely bad taste. It was a way of life "among the dispossessed communities that look to modernity and have found in money the only way to exist in the world."

For a generation of traffickers, Escobar left behind a model of success: build support among the disenfranchised by providing them with money and power they would not otherwise have; in return, they will be your loyalists, your spies, and your gunmen. For the middle class, use your wealth to corrupt policemen, generals, judges, and politicians.

The criminals who emulate him are no less ruthless, but they have learned not to seek political power, or much recognition. The Oficina de Envigado—the closest successor to the Medellín cartel—was run, until recently, by Juan Carlos Mesa, alias Tom, a shadowy figure who almost never appeared in public. Colombian special forces pursued him for years, without success. Then, in early December, police raided Tom's fiftieth-birthday celebration. (They were tipped off to the party by informants, who noticed unusually generous purchases of twenty-one-year-old Chivas.) There were some fifteen guests at the party, and, to the authorities' surprise, Popeye was among them. Despite an unconvincing alibi—he just happened to be in the area, handing out copies of his memoir, and had stumbled upon the party—Popeye was released, for lack of evidence. Even so, the incident triggered calls for him to be returned to prison, including one from Colombia's President, Juan Manuel Santos.

Popeye's response was characteristi-

cally defiant. He fired off a flurry of tweets, saying, "It isn't a crime to go to a party," and calling his opponents "miserable rats." In a subsequent tweet, he sent a warning: "If I have to go to prison, I'll go. Very soon I will again be attacking this damned government."

At the height of Escobar's power, he built himself a paradise: La Hacienda Nápoles, a seven-thousand-acre estate three hours from Medellín. Escobar spent years converting the property from an isolated wilderness to a refuge, with paved roads, artificial lakes, and a private zoo stocked with zebras, hippopotamuses, and giraffes, as well as a series of life-size dinosaur sculptures. Guests had the use of swimming pools, a party house, stables, a bullring, a vintage-car collection, and a fleet of speedboats. In a characteristic flourish, Escobar adorned the arch over the entrance with a single-engine Piper Cub, a replica of the airplane that had carried his first load of coke to the United States.

After Escobar's death, the compound was abandoned, its structures ransacked by memento seekers and by treasure hunters pursuing rumors that Escobar had hidden millions of dollars in cash on the property. After being repossessed by the state, Hacienda Nápoles was reopened in 2007, as a theme park with a zoo, a water park, and several family-friendly hotels. Escobar's hippopotamuses are a main attraction. The herd, which began with three females and a male bought from a California zoo, is now believed to contain as many as fifty, making it the largest herd living freely outside Africa. As the estate fell into disrepair, several of them wandered off and found new habitat. One of the hippos was discovered in the nearby town of Doradal. As it lumbered down the street, children dodged around it, shrieking; the locals joked about making the hippo a mascot. Several family groups have migrated into the nearby Magdalena River system. Colombian authorities suggested a hunt to cull the hippos before they upset the local ecosystem or become a danger to humans, but after a public outcry the matter was dropped.

I visited the Hacienda Nápoles one day with Edgar Jiménez, who had been

Escobar's personal photographer and a friend of his since grade school. "Pablo said I was the only photographer who could take his photo," Jiménez told me. "I did all their family events, like birthdays, weddings, and first Communions." Like everyone else, he cherished the stories. Once, he said, he was summoned to the hacienda to find Escobar hosting one of his cartel partners, the German-Colombian Carlos Lehder Rivas. An avid neo-Nazi and frequent cocaine user, Lehder had become unstable. After a soccer match that evening, he fatally shot one of Escobar's men; Lehder was jealous because his girlfriend was "making eyes" at the man. Escobar calmly asked Lehder to leave the next morning and, according to Jiménez, made sure that authorities knew his whereabouts. Soon after, Lehder became the first Colombian narco-trafficker to be extradited to the United States.

I asked Jiménez if he felt any qualms about his relationship with Escobar. "I wasn't in agreement with the violence," he said. "But I was just the photographer, remember? And it has to be understood that this violent relationship Pablo had with the state was the product of the rejection he felt by Colombian society. Everyone had profited from him, and later they had betrayed him."

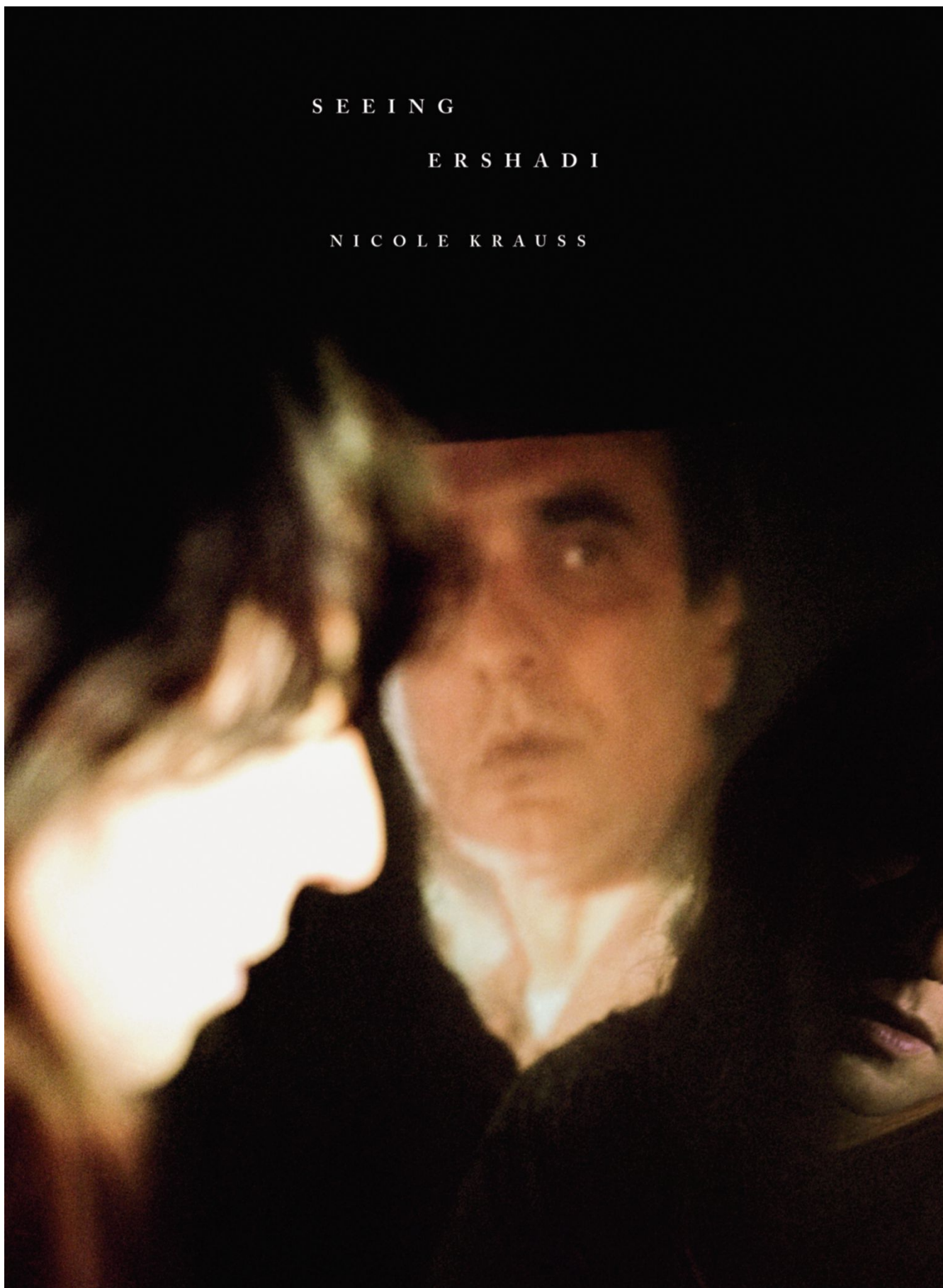
At the entrance to Hacienda Nápoles, Jiménez was thrilled to see Escobar's plane still hanging over the gate, with a new paint job of black-and-white zebra stripes. Inside the compound, though, we found that Escobar's main house had been torn down, and his vintage-car collection had been torched, leaving a carport full of rusting hulks. But the outlines of the old swimming pool were still there, on the lawn. (In a video game that spun out of "Narcos," the pool provides a backdrop for a gun battle between Escobar and the D.E.A.) Where the clinic for Escobar's employees had been was a food court, overlooking a huge swimming pool with slides and fountains and bridges; in one section of the pool, a gigantic sculpture of an octopus spread its tentacles, and kids swam back and forth underneath. Jiménez was delighted, and said that he'd like to return with his grandson. Before we left, he asked for a brochure that listed package deals for family weekends. ♦



S E E I N G

E R S H A D I

N I C O L E K R A U S S



I'd been in the company for more than a year by then. It had been my dream to dance for the choreographer since I first saw his work, and for a decade all my desire had been focussed on getting there. I'd sacrificed whatever was necessary during the years of rigorous training. When at last I auditioned and he invited me to join his company, I dropped everything and flew to Tel Aviv. We rehearsed from noon to five, and I devoted myself to the choreographer's process and vision without reserve, applied myself without reserve. Sometimes tears came spontaneously, from something that had rushed upward and burst. When I met people in bars and cafés, I spoke excitedly about the experience of working with the choreographer and told them that I felt I was constantly on the verge of discovery. Until one day I realized that I had become fanatical—that what I had taken for devotion had crossed the line into something else. And though my awareness of this was a dark blot on what had been, up to then, a pure joy, I didn't know what to do with it.

Exhausted after rehearsal, I'd either walk to the sea or go home to watch a film until it got late enough to go out and meet people. I couldn't go to the beach as often as I'd have liked, because the choreographer said that he wanted the skin all over our bodies to be as white as the skin on our asses. I'd developed tendinitis in my ankle, which made it necessary for me to ice it after dancing, and so I found myself watching a lot of films lying on my back with my foot up. I saw everything with Jean-Louis Trintignant, until he got so old that his imminent death began to be too depressing, and then I switched to Louis Garrel, who is beautiful enough to live forever. Sometimes, when my friend Romi wasn't working, she came to watch with me. By the time I finished with Garrel it was winter, and swimming was out of the question anyway, so I spent two weeks inside with Ingmar Bergman. When the New Year started, I resolved to give up Bergman and the weed I smoked every night, and, because the title was appealing and it was made far from Sweden, I downloaded "Taste of Cherry," by the Iranian director Abbas Kiarostami.

The film opens with the actor Homayoun Ershadi's face. He plays Mr. Badii, a middle-aged man driving slowly through the streets of Tehran in search of someone, scanning crowds of men clamoring to be hired for labor. Not finding what he's looking for, he drives on, into the arid hills outside the city. When he sees a man on the edge of the road, he slows the car and offers him a ride; the man refuses, and when Badii continues to try to convince him the man gets angry and stalks off, looking back darkly over his shoulder. After more driving, five or seven minutes of it—an eternity in a film—a young soldier appears, hitchhiking, and Badii offers him a ride to his barracks. He begins to question the boy about his life in the Army and his family in Kurdistan, and the more personal and direct the questions are the more awkward the situation becomes for the soldier, who is soon squirming in his seat. Some twenty minutes into the film, Badii finally comes out with it: he's searching for someone to bury him. He's dug his own grave into the side of one of those bone-dry hills, and tonight he plans to take pills and lie down in it; all he needs is for someone to come in the morning to check that he's really dead, and then to cover him with twenty shovelfuls of earth.

The soldier opens the car door, leaps out, and flees into the hills. What Mr. Badii is asking amounts to being an accomplice to a crime, since suicide is forbidden in the Quran. The camera gazes after the soldier as he grows smaller and smaller until he disappears altogether into the landscape, then it returns to Ershadi's extraordinary face, a face that remains almost completely expressionless throughout the film, and yet manages to convey a gravity and a depth of feeling that could never come from acting—that can come only from an intimate knowledge of what it is to be pushed to the brink of hopelessness. Not once in the film are we told anything about the life of Mr. Badii, or what might have led him to decide to end it. Nor do we witness his despair. Everything we know about the depth contained within him we get from his face, which also tells us about the depth contained within the actor Homayoun Ershadi, about whose life we know

even less. When I did a search, I discovered that Ershadi was an architect with no training or experience as an actor when Kiarostami saw him sitting in his car in traffic, lost in thought, and knocked on his window. And it was easy to understand just by looking at his face: how the world seemed to bend toward Ershadi as if it needed him more than he needed it.

His face did something to me. Or, rather, the film, with its compassion and its utterly jarring ending, which I won't give away, did something to me. But, then again, you could also say that, in some sense, the film was only his face: his face and those lonely hills.

Not long after that, it became warm again. When I opened the windows, the smell of cats came in, but also of sunshine, salt, and oranges. Along the wide streets, the ficus trees showed new green. I wanted to take something from this renewal, to be a small part of it, but the truth was that my body was increasingly run-down. My ankle was getting worse the more I danced on it, and I was going through a bottle of Advil a week. When it was time for the company to go on tour again, I didn't feel like going, even though it was to Japan, where I'd always wanted to travel. I wanted to stay and rest and feel the sun, I wanted to lie on the beach with Romi and smoke and talk about boys, but I packed my bag and rode with a couple of the other dancers to the airport.

We had three performances in Tokyo, followed by two free days, and a group of us decided to go to Kyoto. It was still winter in Japan. On the train from Tokyo, heavy tile roofs went by, houses with small windows. We found a *ryokan* to stay at, with a room done up with tatami mats and shoji panels, and walls the color and texture of sand. Everything struck me as incomprehensible; I constantly made mistakes. I wore the special bathroom slippers out of the bathroom and across the room. When I asked the woman who served us an elaborate dinner what happened if something was spilled on the tatami mat, she began to scream with laughter. If she could have fallen off her seat, she would have. But the room had no seats at all. Instead, she stuffed the

wrapping for my hot towel into the gaping sleeve of her kimono, but very beautifully, so that one could forget the fact that she was disposing of garbage.

On our last morning in Japan, I got up early and went out with a map, on which I had marked the temples I wanted to visit. Everything was still stripped and bare. Not even the plum trees were in blossom yet, so there was nothing to bring out the hordes with their cameras, and I'd got used to being mostly alone in the temples and the gardens, and to a silence that was only deepened by the loud cawing of crows. So it was a surprise when, having passed through the monumental entrance gate of Nanzen-ji, I ran into a



large group of Japanese women chatting happily in singsong fashion on the covered walkway that led to the abbot's residence. They were all outfitted in elegant silk kimonos, and everything about them, from the ornate inlaid combs in their hair to their gathered obi belts and their patterned drawstring purses, was of another age. The only exception was the dull-brown slippers on their feet, the same kind offered at the entrance of every temple in Kyoto, all of which were tiny and reminded me of the shoes that Peter Rabbit lost in the lettuce patch. I'd tried them myself the day before, shoving my feet into them and gripping with my toes while attempting to slide across the smooth wooden floors, but, after almost breaking my neck trying to climb stairs in them, I'd given up and taken to walking across the icy planks in my socks. This made it impossible to ever get warm, and, shivering in my sweater and coat, I wondered how the women didn't freeze wearing only silk, and whether assistance was needed to tie and wrap and secure all the necessary parts of their kimonos.

Without noticing, bit by bit I'd worked my way into the center of the group, so that when suddenly the women began to move in unison, as if in response to some secret signal, I was swept along, down the wide and dim open-air corridor, carried by the flow of silk and the hurried pitter-patter of tiny slippers. About twenty feet down the walkway, the group came to a halt and spat out from its amoeba-like body

a woman dressed in normal street clothes, who now began to address the others. By standing on my tiptoes, I could just see over the women's heads to the four-hundred-year-old Zen garden that was one of the most famous in all of Japan. A Zen garden, with its raked gravel and precise minimum of rocks, bushes, and trees, is meant not to be entered but to be contemplated

from the outside, and just beyond where the group had stopped was the empty portico designed for this. But when I tried to make my way out by tapping shoulders and asking to be excused, the group seemed only to tighten around me. Whomever I tapped would

turn to me with a bewildered look, and take a few quick little steps to the left or the right so that I could pass, but immediately another woman in a kimono would flow in to fill the void, either out of an innate instinct to correct the group's balance or just to get closer to the tour guide. Enclosed on all sides, breathing in the dizzying stench of perfume, and listening to the guide's relentlessly incomprehensible explanations, I began to feel claustrophobic. But before I could try to elbow my way out more violently, the women suddenly started to move again, and by flattening myself against the wall of the abbot's residence I managed to stay put, forcing them to move around me. They crossed the wooden floor in a chorus of scuffling slippers.

It was then that I saw him making his way along the covered walkway in the opposite direction. He looked older, and his wavy hair had turned silver, making his dark eyebrows seem even more severe. Something else was different, too. In the film, it had been absolutely necessary to project an impression of his physical solidity, which Kiarostami had done by keeping the camera closely trained on his broad shoulders and strong torso as he drove through the hills outside Tehran. But even when Ershadi had got out of the car to gaze at the arid hills and the camera had hung back at a distance, he'd appeared physically formidable, and this had given him an authority that, combined with the depth of feeling in his eyes, had made me want

to weep. But, as he continued down the covered walkway, Ershadi looked almost slender. He'd lost weight, but it was more than that: it seemed that the width of his shoulders had contracted. Now that I was seeing him from behind, I began to doubt that it was Ershadi. But just as disappointment began to pour into me like concrete, the man stopped and turned, as if someone had called to him. He stood very still, looking back at the Zen garden, where the stones were meant to symbolize tigers, leaping toward a place they would never reach. A soft light fell on his expressionless face. And there it was again: the brink of hopelessness. At that moment, I was filled with such an overwhelmingly tender feeling that I can only call it love.

Gracefully, Ershadi turned the corner. Unlike me, he had no trouble moving in those slippers.

I started to go after him, but one of the kimonoed women blocked my path. She was waving and gesturing at the group, which was now peering into one of the shadowy rooms of the abbot's house. I don't speak Japanese, I explained, trying to get around her, but she kept hopping in front of me, gibbering away and pointing with more and more insistence at the group, which had now begun to move down the hall toward the anterior garden—move with an almost imperceptible shuffle of their combined feet, as if, in fact, thousands of ants were carrying them along. I'm not with the tour, I said, making a little cross with my wrists, which I had seen the Japanese do when they wanted to signal that something was wrong, or not possible, or even forbidden. I was just on my way out, I said, and pointed toward the exit with the same insistence with which the woman in the kimono was pointing at the group.

She grabbed my elbow and was trying to pull me forcibly back in the other direction. Maybe I had upset the delicate balance of the whole, a balance determined by subtleties that I, in my foreignness, would never understand. Or perhaps I had committed an unpardonable act by leaving the group. Again I had a feeling of impenetrable ignorance, which for me will always be synonymous with travelling in Japan. Sorry, I said, but I really have to go now, and, with a tug more violent than



I'd intended, I freed myself of her hand and jogged toward the exit. But when I turned the corner there was no sign of Ershadi. The reception area was vacant except for the Japanese women's shoes lined up on old wooden shelves. I ran outside and looked around, but the temple grounds were occupied only by large crows, which took clumsily to the sky as I ran past.

Love: I can only call it that, however different it was from every other instance of love that I had experienced. What I knew of love had always stemmed from desire, from the wish to be altered or thrown off course by some uncontrollable force. But in my love for Ershadi I nearly didn't exist beyond that great feeling. To call it compassion makes it sound like a form of divine love, and it wasn't that; it was terribly human. If anything, it was an animal love, the love of an animal that has been living in an incomprehensible world until one day it encounters another of its kind and realizes that it has been applying its comprehension in the wrong place all along.

It sounds far-fetched, but at that moment I had the feeling that I could save Ershadi. Still running, I passed under the monumental wooden gate and my footfalls echoed up in the rafters. A sense of fear began to seep in, fear that he planned to take his life just like the character he'd barely played, and that I had lost the brief chance I'd been given to intercede. When I reached the street it was deserted. I turned in the direction that led to the famous pathway alongside the narrow river and ran, my bag slapping against my thigh. What would I have said to him if I had caught up to him? What would I have asked him about devotion? What was it that I wanted to be when he turned and at last his gaze fell upon me? It didn't matter, because when I came around the bend the path was empty, the trees black and bare. Back at the *ryokan*, hunched on the tatami floor, I searched online, but there was no news about Homayoun Ershadi, nothing to suggest that he was travelling in Japan, or no longer alive.

My doubt only grew on the flight back to Tel Aviv. The plane glided above a great shelf of cloud, and the farther it got from Japan the less possible it

seemed that the man had actually been Ershadi, until at last it seemed absurd, just as kimonos and Japanese toilets and etiquette and tea ceremonies, which had all possessed irrevocable genius in Kyoto, at a distance grew absurd.

The night after I got back to Tel Aviv, I met Romi at a bar. I told her about what had happened in Japan, but in a laughing way: laughing at myself for believing for even a moment that it was actually Ershadi I'd seen and run after. As I told the story, her large eyes became larger. With all the drama of the actress that she is, Romi lifted a hand to her heart and called the waiter to refill her glass, touching his shoulder in the instinctive way she has of drawing others into her world, under the spell of her intensity. Eyes locked with mine, she removed her cigarettes from her bag, lit one, and inhaled. She reached across the table and laid her hand over my hand. Then she tilted her chin and blew out the smoke, all without breaking her gaze.

I don't believe it, she said at last in a throaty whisper. The exact same thing happened to me.

I began to laugh again. Crazy things were always happening to Romi: her life was swept along by an endless series of coincidences and mystical signs.

She was an actress but not a performer, the difference being that at heart she believed that nothing was real, that everything was a kind of game, but her belief in this was sincere, deep, and true, and her feeling for life was enormous. In other words, she didn't live to convince others of anything. The crazy things that happened to her happened because she opened herself to them and sought them out, because she was always trying something without being too invested in the outcome, only in the feeling it provoked and her ability to rise to it. In her films she was only ever herself, a self stretched this way or that by the circumstances of the script. In the year that we had been friends, I had never known her to lie.

Come on, I said, you're not serious. But as she was never less than completely serious, even while laughing, Romi, still gripping my hand across the table, launched into her own story about Ershadi.

She had seen "Taste of Cherry" five or six years ago, in London. Like me, she had been utterly moved by the film and by Ershadi's face. Disturbed, even. And yet, at the last moment, she had been released into joy. Yes, joy was what she had felt, walking home from the theatre in the twilight to her father's apartment. He was dying of cancer and



THE HOME BIRTH OF VENUS

she had come to take care of him. Her parents had divorced when she was three, and during her childhood and her teen-age years she and her father had grown distant, very nearly estranged. But after the Army she had gone through a kind of depression and her father had come to see her in the hospital, and the more he'd sat with her at her bedside the more she'd forgiven him for the things she had held against him all those years. From then on, they had remained close. She had often gone to stay with him in London, and for a little while even attended acting school there and lived with him in his apartment in Belsize Park. A few years later, his cancer had been diagnosed and a long battle ensued that looked to have been won, until at some point it became clear, beyond a shadow of a doubt, that it had been lost. The doctors gave him three months to live.

Romi left everything in Tel Aviv, and moved back to her father's apartment, and during the months that his body began to shut down she stayed by his side, rarely leaving him. He had decided against having any more of the poisonous treatments that would have prolonged his life by only a matter of weeks or months. He wished to die with dignity and in peace, though no one ever really dies in peace, as the body's journey toward the extinction of life always requires violence. These large and small forms of violence were the stuff of their days, but always mingled with her father's humor. They took walks while he could still walk, and when he couldn't anymore they spent long hours watching detective series and nature documentaries. Seeing her father's transfixed expression in the glow of the TV, it struck Romi that he was no less deeply invested in these stories, the stories of unsolved murders, of spies, and of the struggle of a dung beetle trying to roll its ball of manure over a hill, now that his own story was quickly drawing to a close. Too weak to get out of bed to go to the bathroom at night, he would try anyway, and then Romi would hear him collapse on the floor and would go and cradle his head and pick him up, because by then he was no heavier than a child.

It was during this time, the time that her father could no longer make it even

## NEW YEAR

Listen to the after-work shovels and snow brushes  
on my quiet winter street. Nasal congestion. Loose boots.  
The whole country is outraged and outspoken and you should be too

because if you're not, then you're not doing your part.  
People are having a hard time. At work, patients cry  
almost every day. I make sure they have tissues;

I get them a glass of water. I say, That's terrible or That's hard.  
It is hard to be at the hospital, to live in a room that's not yours  
and have people coming to check your blood pressure all the time.

You get bad news, you have medical bills, no sleep. Your pain  
exists on a scale from 0 to 10. When I saw the sac on the ultrasound  
screen,  
I whispered, There's nothing in there. A tiny hollow space. I have a bad  
habit

of saying I'm sorry when I mean to say something else and when  
I cried in front of the nurse I said, I'm sorry, but  
I meant to say something that I still don't have words for.

It's a soft pain, looking at a toilet full of blood, taking Tylenol  
and calling in to work for a personal day. It's not a special pain,  
but I've just never felt it before. Tomorrow, I will get up

and do all the things that I've been meaning to do. I will put a bra  
on. The houses on this street were all built by a man who  
died five years after finishing this one. He didn't have a good reputation.

I am a homeowner, it's part of the American Dream.  
This is not the worst thing that's ever happened. The nurse  
put the Kleenex box in front of me and said, It sucks, it sucks.

—Rachel Coye

the short distance to the bathroom and the round-the-clock nurse had to throw him over her large Ukrainian shoulder, that, at the nurse's insistence, Romi pulled on her coat and left the house for a few hours to go to see a film. She didn't know anything about the film, but she was drawn to the title, which she had seen on the marquee on a trip to or from the hospital.

She took a seat toward the back of the nearly empty theatre. There were only five or six people there, Romi said, but, unlike when the theatre is full and everyone disappears around you as the screen comes alive, she felt acutely aware of the presence of the others, most of whom had also come alone. During the

many wordless stretches of the film, stretches in which one hears car horns and the sound of bulldozers and the laughter of unseen children, and the long shots when the camera rests on Ershadi's face, Romi felt aware of herself watching, and the others also watching. At the moment when she understood that Mr. Badii was planning to take his life and that he was looking for someone to bury him in the morning, she began to cry. Soon after that, a woman stood up and walked out of the theatre, and this made Romi feel a little bit better, since it created an unspoken bond among those who remained.

I said that I wouldn't give away the end, but now I see that there is no way

around it, that I will have to, since it was Romi's belief that if the film had come to a normal end what happened to each of us later almost certainly would not have happened. That is, if, after presumably swallowing the pills and putting on a light jacket against the cold, Mr. Badii had just lain down in the ditch that he'd dug, and everything had grown dim as we watched his impassive face watch the full moon sail in and out from behind the smoky clouds, and then, as a clap of thunder sounded, when it had grown so dark that we could no longer see him at all until a flash of lightning illuminated the screen again and there he was, still lying there, staring out, still of this world, still waiting, as we are still waiting, only to be plunged into darkness again until the next bright flash, in which we'd discover that his eyes had at last drifted closed, and then the screen turned black for good, leaving only the sound of rain falling harder and harder, until finally it crescendoed and faded away—if the film had just ended there, as it seemed to have every intention of doing, then, Romi said, it might not have stayed with her.

But the film did not end there. Instead, the rhythmic chanting of marching soldiers drifts in, and slowly the screen comes to life again. This time, when the same hilly landscape comes into view, it's spring, everything is green, and the grainy, discolored footage is shot on video. The soldiers march in formation onto the winding road in the lower left corner of the screen. This new view is surprising enough, but a moment later a member of the film's crew appears, carrying a camera toward another man, who is setting up a tripod, and then Ershadi himself—Ershadi, whom we just saw fall asleep in his grave—casually walks into the frame, wearing light, summery clothes. He takes a cigarette from his front pocket, lights it between his lips, and without a word hands it to Kiarostami, who accepts it without pausing his conversation with the D.P., and without so much as looking at Ershadi, who in that moment we understand is connected to him through a channel of pure intuition. The shot cuts to the soundman, a little farther down the hill, crouching down out of the

wind in the high grass with his giant microphone.

Can you hear me? a disembodied voice asks.

Down below, the drill sergeant falters and ceases his shouting.

*Bâlê?* he says. Yes?

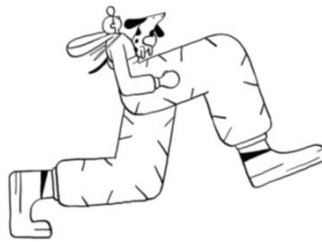
Tell your men to stay near the tree to rest, Kiarostami replies. The shoot is over.

The last line of the film is spoken a few moments later, as Louis Armstrong's mournful trumpet starts to wail, and the soldiers can be seen sitting and laughing and talking and gathering flowers by the tree where Mr. Badii lay down in the hope of eternal rest, though now the tree is covered with green leaves.

We're here for a sound take, Kiarostami says.

And then it is just that huge, beautiful, plaintive trumpet, without words. Romi sat through the trumpet and the credits, and, though tears were streaming down her face, she felt elated.

It was not until some time after she had laid her father in the ground, and shovelled the dirt into his grave herself, pushing away her uncle, who tried to pry the tool from her, that Romi recalled Ershadi. So many intense things had happened to her since she had walked home full of joy in the twilight that she hadn't had time to think about the film again. She had stayed on in London to take care of her father's



things, and when there was nothing left to take care of, when everything had been finalized and squared away, she remained in the nearly empty apartment for months.

During the days, all of which passed in the same way, she lay around listlessly, unable to apply herself to anything. The only time she could feel any desire was during sex, and so she had started seeing Mark again, a man she had dated during the year she was at

acting school. He was possessive, which was part of why their relationship had ended in the first place. And now that she had been with other men since they'd broken up, he was even more jealous and obsessive, and wouldn't stop pushing her to tell him what it had been like with them. But the sex they had was hard and good, and she found it bracing after the months of feeling as though she had no body, as though her father's failing body were the only body there was.

At night, after Mark came home from work, Romi would go to his place, and in the darkened bedroom he would scroll through pornography until he found what he was looking for, and then would fuck her as she lay on her stomach and they watched two or three men penetrating one woman on the massive screen of his TV, pushing their dicks into her pussy and her ass and her mouth, everyone breathing and moaning in surround sound. Just before he came, Mark would slap Romi hard on the ass, thrusting himself into her and calling her a whore, enacting some ancient pain that drove him to believe that the woman he loved would never remain true to him. One night after this performance Mark had fallen asleep with his arms around her, and Romi had lain awake, for, exhausted as she always was, she couldn't sleep. Finally, she shimmied out from under him and crawled around on the floor in search of her underwear. Having no desire to stay, and no desire to go, she'd sunk back down on the edge of Mark's bed and felt the remote control under her. She switched on the TV and surfed the channels, passed over the stories of mother elephants and bee colonies that she had watched with her father, over the cold cases and the late-night talk shows, until there, nearly filling the enormous screen, was Ershadi's face. For a second, it appeared larger than life in the otherwise dark room, and then it was lost again, because her thumb had continued its restless search before she realized what she was seeing. When she flipped back, she couldn't find him. There was nothing on about film, or Iran, or Kiarostami. She sat there, startled and bewildered in the dark, and then slowly a sense of longing came over her like a wave, and she



started to laugh for the first time since her father had died, and she knew it was time to go home.

There was no choice but to believe Romi. Her story was so precise that she couldn't have made it up. Sometimes she exaggerated the details, but she did it believing the exaggerations, and this only made her more lovable, because it showed you what she could do with the raw material of the world. And yet, after I went home and the spell of her presence wore off, I lay on my bed feeling sad and empty and increasingly depressed, since not only was my encounter with Ershadi not unique but, worse, unlike Romi, I'd had no idea what it meant, or what I was supposed to do with it. I had failed to understand anything, or take anything from it, and had told the story as a joke, laughing at myself. Lying alone in the dark, I started to cry. Sick of the pain throbbing in my ankle, I swallowed a handful of Advil in the bathroom. The pills swilled in my stomach with the wine I'd drunk, and soon enough nausea overtook me, and then I was kneeling on the bathroom floor throwing up into the toilet.

The next morning, I woke to banging on the door. Romi had had a sense that something was wrong and had tried to call, but I hadn't picked up all night. Still woozy, I started to cry again. Seeing the state I was in, she went into high gear, boiling tea, laying me out on the couch, and cleaning up my face. She held my hand, her other palm resting on her own throat, as if my pain were her pain, and she felt everything and understood everything.

Two months later, I quit the company. I enrolled in graduate school at N.Y.U., but stayed on in Tel Aviv through the summer, and flew back only days before the start of the semester. Romi had met Amir by then, an entrepreneur fifteen years older than her, with so much money that he spent most of his time looking for ways to give it away. He wooed Romi with the same singular drive he applied to everything he wanted. A few days before my flight, Romi threw a goodbye party for me at our favorite restaurant, and all the dancers came, and our friends, and most of the boys we'd slept with

that year. Amir didn't come because he was busy, and the following day Romi left for Sardinia on his yacht. I packed up my things alone. I was sad to leave, and wondered if I'd made a mistake.

For a while, we stayed in close touch. Romi got married, moved to Amir's mansion on a cliff above the Mediterranean, and got pregnant. I studied for my degree, and fell in love, and then out of it a couple of years later. In the meantime, Romi had two children, and sometimes she sent me photos of those boys, whose faces were hers and seemed to borrow nothing from their father. But we were in touch less and less, and then whole years passed in which we didn't speak at all. One day, soon after my daughter was born, I was passing a cinema on Twelfth Street and I felt someone's gaze, and when I turned I saw Ershadi's eyes staring out at me from the poster for "Taste of Cherry." I felt a shiver up my spine. The screening had already passed, but no one had taken down the poster. I took a photo of it and that night I sent it to Romi, reminding her of a plan we'd once hatched to go to Tehran—me with a fresh American passport without Israeli stamps, and her with the British one she had through her father—to sit in the cafés and walk the streets that were the setting of so many films we loved, to taste life there, and lie on the beaches of the Caspian Sea. We were going to find Ershadi, who we imagined would invite us into the sleek apartment he had designed himself and listen while we told him our stories, and then tell us his own while we drank black tea with a view of the snowcapped Elburz Mountains. In the letter, I admitted to her the reason that I'd cried the night she told me about her encounter with Ershadi. Sooner or later, I wrote, I would've had to admit that in the blaze of my ambition I'd failed to check myself. I would have had to face how miserable I was, and how confused my feelings about dancing had become. But the desire to seize something from Ershadi, to feel that reality had expanded for me as it had for her, that the other world had come through to touch me, had hastened my revelations.

I didn't hear back from Romi for weeks, and then finally her answer arrived. She apologized for taking so long. It was strange, she said. She hadn't thought of Ershadi for years until three

months ago, when she'd decided to watch "Taste of Cherry" again. She'd recently left Amir, and on nights when she couldn't sleep in the new apartment, with its unfamiliar smells and noises from the street, she would stay up watching movies. What surprised her was how differently Ershadi's character struck her this time. While she'd remembered him as passive, nearly saint-like, now she saw that he was impatient and often surly with the men he approached, and manipulative in the way he tried to get them to agree to what he wanted, sizing up their vulnerabilities and saying whatever was necessary to convince them. His focus on his own misery, and his single-minded determination to carry out his plan, struck her as self-absorbed. What also surprised her, because she didn't remember it, were the words that appear for a moment on the black screen before the film begins: "In the name of God." How could she have missed that the first time? she wondered. Of course she'd thought of me as she lay in the dark and watched—of that year when we were still so young and spoke endlessly of men. How much time we wasted, she wrote, believing that things came to us as gifts, through channels of wonder, in the form of signs, in the love of men, in the name of God, rather than seeing them for what they were: strengths that we dragged up from the nothingness of our own depths. She told me about a film that she wanted to write when she finally got the time, which followed the story of a dancer like me. And then she told me about her boys, who needed her for everything, it seemed, just as the men in her life had always needed her for everything. It was good, she wrote, that I had a daughter. And then, as if she had forgotten that she had already moved on to other things, as if we were still sitting across from each other, deep in one of our conversations without beginning, middle, or end, Romi wrote that the last thing that had surprised her was that when Ershadi is lying in the grave he's dug and his eyes finally drift closed and the screen goes black, it isn't really black at all. If you look closely, you can see the rain falling. ♦

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**THE WRITER'S VOICE PODCAST**

Nicole Krauss reads "Seeing Ershadi."

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## THE CRITICS



ON STAGE

# THE EDUCATION OF TIFFANY HADDISH

*The comedian's live experiments.*

BY HILTON ALS

**Y**ou know how it is. Sometimes you just identify with a person, no matter his or her demographic. There we were at the Pageant in St. Louis in January, part of a mostly black, mostly heteronormative, coupled-up crowd, when this white guy—seemingly out of nowhere—rushed the stage to tell

the thirty-eight-year-old comedian and actress Tiffany Haddish how much he loved her. Haddish was in town on her “She Ready” tour. (The tour continues through May, with stops in Atlantic City, on March 9th, and Washington, D.C., on March 10th.) Dressed in artfully torn, not-too-tight jeans and a

denim vest, Haddish—her fans call her Tiff—had been onstage for only ten minutes or so when the little dude lost it. You could kind of say it was Tiff’s fault. Entering the wide stage, carrying a tall glass full of clear liquid, she bounced a bit to the music as she made her way to the stool and mike stand in



*"He has a tell."*

the spotlight. Haddish put her drink down on the stool, then, as the music got louder, broke into an impromptu Nae Nae, popping her hips and lifting her legs one at a time. The Nae Nae and the old-school choreography it comes out of are hard to describe if you didn't grow up with them at those long-ago basement parties when the O'Jays were the shit, those carefree evenings in roller rinks going around and around while all that delicious Chaka or Foxy was piped in, or those nights on the Christopher Street piers watching girls like Tiffany—smart-as-hell girls who had nothing, growing up, except their charisma and their spirit—dance for their own enjoyment, and for ours.

As the music died down, so did Haddish. Huffing and puffing, she said, "Maybe I shouldn't have done that." She reached for her glass and added, "Maybe this vodka will help open up my *lungs*." Haddish, whose accent sounds Southern by way of L.A., doesn't know much about her family, beyond what she herself experienced. Her father, a refugee from Eritrea, split when she was three. Her mother—who suffers from schizophrenia—had a horrific car accident when Tiffany was nine, after which she and her four younger half siblings were made wards of the court. Their grandmother eventually took them in, partly for the paycheck. As

soon as Tiffany turned eighteen, she was out—and, for a while, homeless, couch-surfing with friends and trying not to be cynical about the world.

But that's another story. Right now, in St. Louis, she can't breathe because of the Nae Nae. The vodka seems to revive her, though; when someone shouts, "Yo, Tiff, what's that in your drink?"—there are a few red lumps in the glass—she says, fake demure, "Strawberries. They my antioxidants." Her coy little-girl expression is familiar to audience members who have seen the 2017 movie "Girls Trip," in which Haddish, Queen Latifah, Jada Pinkett Smith, and Regina Hall play childhood friends who go through a number of emotions and hair styles together at the Essence Festival, in New Orleans. Or to those who watched the episode of Comedy Central's "Drunk History," earlier this year, when a tipsy, laughing Haddish described—or tried to describe—the life of the fabled French art historian and Resistance member Rose Valland.

In any case, adopting that demeanor got Haddish some laughs, as did her next bit, which was fascinating because it took a while to grasp. Sipping her drink, she was quiet for a moment, then another. "I'm taking my time being funny," she said, "cause I don't know anybody black who start their job right away." The audience wasn't

quite sure how to handle this moment, or several others, as Haddish tried on different roles: actress, social commentator, comedian, and then back again. She wasn't doing situational comedy; she was trying to find characters to fill out her sketches. At first, it was awkward, but when she included us on one of the "breaks" she took during her fifty-minute show we felt we knew her the way co-workers would: she was the woman who puts more energy into standing around the water cooler, looking for attention and asking if you know anyone to set her up with, than she'll ever put into her work.

Walking slowly downstage left, Haddish asked the single guys in the audience to raise their voices. Not many did, and those who did sounded pretty weak. That was when the white guy rushed the stage. Haddish was sweet and obliging when he asked to take a picture with her. Here was someone to play with and against: a new opportunity to see what might happen. Bending down for the selfie, she kept going, squatting so that her crotch was eye level with the guy as he stood in front of the stage, then asked, spreading her legs, "Do you love me?" When the guy said yes, she asked—again in her little-girl voice—if he would marry her. Shaking his head, he told her that he was gay. Haddish's face fell like a wedding cake left out in the rain. Just then, a tall, well-built black man passed in front of the stage, and Haddish asked, "Wait, is that your man?" The audience roared. That was the Tiff persona they'd come to see, always down to leave an O.K. dude for a finer one. The fun receded when a female heckler demanded, moments later, that Haddish take a selfie with her, too. Haddish's face turned stern. Looking out into the dark in the direction of the voice, she said, "I took that picture with that dude because he was *brave*."

**B**ravery is certainly something Haddish knows about, if not in an entirely typical way. When acting is better than good, it hatches from a different part of the brain, a different kind of intelligence. Superior performers know what works in a theatrical sense—and how not to let the conscious mind interfere with their

impulses. Acting talent isn't essential to standup, but it definitely improves it. In standup, there is no fourth wall: there's just you and the words you throw at the audience to see what sticks.

In her 2017 Showtime special, "Tiffany Haddish: She Ready! From the Hood to Hollywood!," the comedian told stories about her life with a great deal of physical and vocal verve: she was an outsized version of a self we didn't yet know but wanted to. Live onstage, in St. Louis, she was much more nuanced as she experimented with what it was like to do nothing in front of an audience. Ironically, she was following one of the primary rules of screen acting: be solid and reflective so that the audience can read your thoughts. (Haddish has no fewer than four films and two TV series in the works.) The crowd at the Pageant wanted the familiar Tiff—the one they knew from "Girls Trip," with her revenge fantasies and her physical looseness. And, to accommodate them, she told stories about what was cut out of "Girls Trip" and how much fun the other actresses were, but you could see—as you can with the greatest performers, because they're transparent and always thinking about how to evolve—that Haddish was moving away from all that and toward what she's always, on some level, been: an artist, with the determination of an artist.

In her harrowing and unforgettable memoir, "The Last Black Unicorn," Haddish relates how, in order to save herself, she would make the mean girls at school laugh at her, and how, in the course of doing that, she sometimes made up imaginary characters, even animals, that she acted out. (She pretended that she had a pet bird named Cracker.) A social worker suggested that the fifteen-year-old who was so disruptive but funny in class attend the Laugh Factory Comedy Camp. It was that or go into "psychiatric therapy." Haddish chose comedy. She remembers:

I'd have to catch the bus up there from 54th and Western. . . . Riding that bus, you would see the demographics of the people change, as you went from South Central through Hollywood. I remember getting on the bus feeling poor. But as we would get to Hollywood, I would see a little bit higher class of people boarding the bus. I felt like I was literally moving in the world.

It's hard to find a more apt description of a performer: she merges with the environment, the atmosphere, as she travels through it, becoming and unbecoming herself.

Haddish recalls how Richard Pryor showed up at the camp one day while she was doing standup and gave her a valuable lesson:

RICHARD: "Stop, stop, stop. What are you doing?"

TIFFANY: "I'm telling a joke."

RICHARD: "No, you're not." . . .

TIFFANY: "Well, what'chu think I'm doing up here?"

RICHARD: "You're getting on my goddam nerves, that's what'chu doing! Look, people don't come to comedy shows because they want to hear about your problems, or about politics, or what's going on in the world, or celebrities. They don't care. They come to comedy shows to have fun. So when you're onstage, you need to be having fun. If you're having fun, they're having fun. If you not having fun, they looking at you like 'what the hell did I spend my money on?' So you need to have fun."

In St. Louis, Haddish had the most fun not when the audience showed her its love but when unexpected moments came at her fast and sharp, adding to what she had brought with her to work on. She's a brilliant improviser in need of an equally inspired director, who could help shape what's already there: the enormous charisma of a woman who has climbed out of the wreckage of her younger days, with story after story about how, though the past may affect you, you can't let it derail your present. Unlike her opening act—her old friend Marlo Williams, who was excellent and, point by point, funnier than Haddish—Haddish doesn't draw her comedy from the Moms Mabley and LaWanda Page gut-bucket school of black female complaint. (She also has no relationship to the kind of dither and privileged chatter that the women on "2 Dope Queens" offer up.) She uses trouble in her performances only to show that she can fuck it up. Both shows I saw at the Pageant were at once acts of creation and acts of self-creation. And though a number of comedians have wanted to play the maestro Pryor onstage or onscreen, my money would be on Haddish to get it right, because, like her early hero, she knows—fearlessly—how to wait and hold still and try things onstage while letting the world come to her, one fan at a time. ♦

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# SORT YOURSELF OUT, BUCKO

*The gospel of Jordan Peterson.*

BY KELEFA SANNEH



In February, 2000, *The American Journal of Psychiatry* published a concise review of a not-at-all-concise book. The book, “Maps of Meaning: The Architecture of Belief,” was nearly six hundred pages long, and, although it was published by the academic press Routledge, it fit neatly within no scholarly discipline. The reviewer, a sympathetic professor of psychiatry, bravely attempted to explain such forbidding phrases as “the grammatical structure of transformational mythology.” Then he admitted defeat. “Doing justice to this tome in a two-paragraph synopsis is impossible,” he concluded. “This is not a book to be abstracted and summarized.” But he expressed the hope

that curious souls would nevertheless discover this curious book, and savor it “at leisure.”

Eighteen years later, the author of “Maps of Meaning,” Jordan B. Peterson, has produced a sequel, of sorts. It’s called “12 Rules for Life: An Antidote to Chaos,” and it has become an international blockbuster. Peterson, formerly an obscure professor, is now one of the most influential—and polarizing—public intellectuals in the English-speaking world. Lots of fans find him on YouTube, where he is an unusual sort of celebrity, a stern but mercurial lecturer who often holds forth for hours, mixing polemics with pep talks. Peterson grew up in Fair-

view, Canada, a small town in Northern Alberta, and he has a fondness for quaint slang; his accent and vocabulary combine to make him seem like a man out of time and out of place, especially in America. His central message is a thoroughgoing critique of modern liberal culture, which he views as suicidal in its eagerness to upend age-old verities. And he has learned to distill his wide-ranging theories into pithy sentences, including one that has become his de facto catchphrase, a possibly spurious quote that nevertheless captures his style and his substance: “Sort yourself out, bucko.”

Peterson is fifty-five, and his delayed success should give hope to underappreciated academics everywhere. For a few years, in the nineteen-nineties, he taught psychology at Harvard; by the time he published “Maps of Meaning,” in 1999, he was back in Canada—teaching at the University of Toronto, working as a clinical psychologist, and building a reputation, on television, as an acerbic pundit. His fame grew in 2016, during the debate over a Canadian bill known as C-16. The bill sought to expand human-rights law by adding “gender identity and gender expression” to the list of grounds upon which discrimination is prohibited. In a series of videotaped lectures, Peterson argued that such a law could be a serious infringement of free speech. His main focus was the issue of pronouns: many transgender or gender-nonbinary people use pronouns different from the ones they were assigned at birth—including, sometimes, “they,” in the singular, or nontraditional ones, like “ze.” The Ontario Human Rights Commission had found that, in a workplace or a school, “refusing to refer to a trans person by their chosen name and a personal pronoun that matches their gender identity” would probably be considered discrimination. Peterson resented the idea that the government might force him to use what he called neologisms of politically correct “authoritarians.” During one debate, recorded at the University of Toronto, he said, “I am not going to be a mouthpiece for language that I detest.” Then he folded his arms, adding, “And that’s that!”

*Jordan Peterson is alternately a defender of conformity and a critic of it.*

Such videos reached millions of on-line viewers, including plenty with no particular stake in Canadian human-rights legislation. To many people disturbed by reports of intolerant radicals on campus, Peterson was a rallying figure: a fearsomely self-assured debater, unintimidated by liberal condemnation. Students staged rowdy protests. The dean of the university sent him a letter warning that his pledge not to use certain pronouns revealed “discriminatory intentions”; the letter also warned, “The impact of your behavior runs the risk of undermining your ability to conduct essential components of your job as a faculty member.” Last fall, a teaching assistant at Wilfrid Laurier University, in Waterloo, Ontario, was reprimanded by professors for showing her class a clip of one of Peterson’s debates. (The university later apologized.) The reprisals only raised Peterson’s profile, and he capitalized on the attention on his Patreon page, where devotees can pledge monthly payments in exchange for exclusive Q. & A. sessions and online courses.

Earlier this year, Peterson appeared on Channel 4 News, in Britain. The interviewer, Cathy Newman, asked what gave him the right to offend transgender people. He asked, cheerfully, what gave her the right to risk offending *him*. Newman paused for an excruciating few moments, and Peterson allowed himself a moment of triumph. “Ha! Gotcha,” he said. David Brooks, in the *Times*, said that Peterson reminded him of “a young William F. Buckley.” Tucker Carlson, on Fox News, called the exchange with Newman “one of the great interviews of all time.”

Given the popularity of these online debates, it can be easy to forget that arguing against political correctness is not Peterson’s main occupation. He remains a psychology professor by trade, and he still spends much of his time doing something like therapy. Anyone in need of his counsel can find plenty of it in “12 Rules for Life.” The book is far easier to comprehend than its predecessor, though it may confuse those who know Peterson only as a culture warrior. One of his many fans is PewDiePie,

a Swedish video gamer who is known as the most widely viewed YouTube personality in the world—his channel has more than sixty million subscribers. In a video review of “12 Rules for Life,” PewDiePie confessed that the book had surprised him. “It’s a self-help book!” he said. “I don’t think I ever would have read a self-help book.” (He nonetheless declared that Peterson’s book, at least the parts he read, was “very interesting.”) Peterson himself embraces the self-help genre, to a point. The book is built around forthright and perhaps impractically specific advice, from Chapter 1, “Stand Up Straight with Your Shoulders Back,” to Chapter 12, “Pet a Cat When You Encounter One on the Street.” Political polemic plays a relatively small role; Peterson’s goal is less to help his readers change the world than to help them find a stable place within it. One of his most compelling maxims is strikingly modest: “You should do what other people do, unless you have a very good reason not to.” Of course, he is famous today precisely because he has determined that, in a range of circumstances, there are good reasons to buck the popular tide. He is, by turns, a defender of conformity and a critic of it, and he thinks that if readers pay close attention, they, too, can learn when to be which.

Like many conversion stories, Peterson’s begins with a crisis of faith—a series of them, in fact. He was raised Protestant, and as a boy he was sent to confirmation class, where he asked the teacher to defend the literal truth of Biblical creation stories. The teacher’s response was convincing neither to Peterson nor, Peterson suspected, to the teacher himself. In “Maps of Meaning,” he remembered his reaction. “Religion was for the ignorant, weak, and superstitious,” he wrote. “I stopped attending church, and joined the modern world.” He turned first to socialism and then to political science, seeking an explanation for “the general social and political insanity and evil of the world,” and each time finding himself unsatisfied. (This was the Cold War era, and Peterson was preoccupied by the

possibility of nuclear annihilation.) The question was, he decided, a psychological one, so he sought psychological answers, and eventually earned a Ph.D. from McGill University, having written a thesis examining the heritability of alcoholism.

All the while, Peterson was also pursuing a grander, stranger project. He had fallen under the sway of Carl Jung, the mystical Swiss psychology pioneer who interpreted modern life as an endless drama, haunted by ancient myths. (Peterson calls Jung “ever-terrifying,” which is a very Jungian sort of compliment.) In “Maps of Meaning,” Peterson drew from Jung, and from evolutionary psychology: he wanted to show that modern culture is “natural,” having evolved over hundreds of thousands of years to reflect and meet our human needs. Then, rather audaciously, he sought to explain exactly how our minds work, illustrating his theory with elaborate geometric diagrams (“The Constituent Elements of Experience as Personality, Territory, and Process”) that seemed to have been created for the purpose of torturing undergraduates.

The new book replaces charts with cheerful drawings of Peterson’s children acting out his advice. In the foreword, Peterson’s friend Norman Doidge, a prominent psychiatrist, tells about meeting him at an outdoor lunch at the house of a mutual friend; Peterson was wearing cowboy boots, and determinedly ignoring a swarm of bees. “He had this odd habit,” Doidge writes, “of speaking about the deepest questions to whoever was at this table—most of them new acquaintances—as though he were just making small talk.”

Throughout the book, Peterson supplies small and strange interjections of autobiography. He recalls the time an old friend named Ed came to visit, accompanied by another guy who was, in Peterson’s estimation, “stoned out of his gourd.” Alarmed, Peterson staged a kind of intervention. “I took Ed aside and told him politely that he had to leave,” Peterson writes. “I said that he shouldn’t have brought his useless bastard of a companion.” Ed took his friend and left—fearing, perhaps, to discover what a less polite

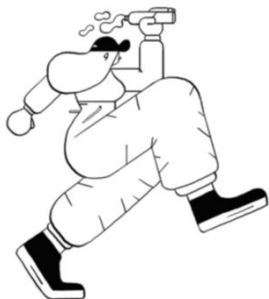
admonition would have sounded like.

Peterson has a way of making even the mildest pronouncement sound like the dying declaration of a political prisoner. In “Maps of Meaning,” he traced this sense of urgency to a feeling of fraudulence that overcame him in college. When he started to speak, he would hear a voice telling him, “You don’t believe that. That isn’t true.” To ward off mental breakdown, he resolved not to say anything unless he was sure he believed it; this practice calmed the inner voice, and in time it shaped his rhetorical style, which is forceful but careful. In “12 Rules for Life,” Peterson recounts a similar experience when, as a psychologist, he worked with a client diagnosed with paranoia. He says that such patients are “almost uncanny in their ability to detect mixed motives, judgment, and falsehood,” and so he redoubled his efforts to say only what he meant. “You have to listen very carefully and tell the truth if you are going to get a paranoid person to open up to you,” he writes. Peterson seems to have found that this approach works on much of the general population, too.

If he once had a tendency to shut himself up, Peterson has wholly overcome it. “Do Not Bother Children When They Are Skateboarding,” he proclaims (Rule 11), but the expected riff about “overprotected” children leads elsewhere: to a grim story about a troubled friend who committed suicide, and then to a remembrance of a professor who boasted that he and his wife had made an ethical decision to have only one child, and from there to an argument that both the unhappy friend and the arrogant professor were “anti-human, to the core.” Elsewhere in the chapter, he writes that “boys’ interests tilt towards things” and “girls’ interests tilt towards people,” and that these interests are “strongly influenced by biological factors.” He is particularly concerned about boys and men, and he flatters them with regular doses of tough love. “Boys are suffering in the modern world,” he writes, and he suggests that the problem is that they’re

not boyish enough. Near the end of the chapter, he tries to coin a new catchphrase: “Toughen up, you weasel.”

When he does battle as a culture warrior, especially on television, Peterson sometimes assumes the role of a strident anti-feminist, intent on ending the oppression of males by destroying the myth of male oppression. (He once referred to his critics as “rabid harpies.”) But his tone is more pragmatic in this book, and some of his critics might be surprised to find much of the advice he offers unobjectionable, if old-fashioned: he wants young men to be better fathers, better husbands, better community members. In this way,



he might be seen as an heir to older gurus of manhood like Elbert Hubbard, who in 1899 published a stern and wildly popular homily called “A Message to Garcia.” (What young men most needed, Hubbard wrote, was “a stiffening of the vertebrae.”) Peterson is an heir, too, to the professional pickup artists who proliferated in the aughts, making a different appeal to feckless men. Where the pickup artists promised to make guys better sexual salesmen (sexual consummation was called “full close,” as in closing a deal), Peterson, more ambitious, promises to help them get married and stay married. “You have to scour your psyche,” he tells them. “You have to clean the damned thing up.” When he claims to have identified “the culminating ethic of the canon of the West,” one might brace for provocation. But what follows, instead, is prescription so canonical that it seems self-evident: “Attend to the day, but aim at the highest good.” In urging men to overachieve, he is also urging them to fit in, and become productive members of Western society.

Every so often, Peterson pauses to remind his readers how lucky they are. “The highly functional infrastructure that surrounds us, particularly in the West,” he writes, “is a gift from our ancestors: the comparatively uncorrupt political and economic systems, the technology, the wealth, the

lifespan, the freedom, the luxury, and the opportunity.” This may sound strange to readers in the United States, where a widespread perception of dysfunction unites politicians and commentators who agree on little else. But Peterson does not live in Donald Trump’s America; in Canada, the Prime Minister is Justin Trudeau, who seems to strike Peterson as the embodiment of wimpy and fraudulent liberalism. Recently, after Trudeau tried to cut off a rambling questioner by half-joking that she should say “peoplekind” instead of “mankind,” Peterson appeared on “Fox & Friends” to register his objection. “I’m afraid that our Prime Minister is only capable of running his ideas on a few very narrow ideological tracks,” he said.

Peterson seems to view Trump, by contrast, as a symptom of modern problems, rather than a cause of them. He suggests that Trump’s rise was unfortunate but inevitable—“part of the same process,” he writes, as the rise of “far-right” politicians in Europe. “If men are pushed too hard to feminize,” he warns, “they will become more and more interested in harsh, fascist political ideology.” Peterson sometimes asks audiences to view him as an alternative to political excesses on both sides. During an interview on BBC Radio 5, he said, “I’ve had thousands of letters from people who were tempted by the blandishments of the radical right, who’ve moved towards the reasonable center as a consequence of watching my videos.” But he typically sees liberals, or leftists, or “postmodernists,” as aggressors—which leads him, rather ironically, to frame some of those on the “radical right” as victims. Many of his political stances are built on this type of inversion. Postmodernists, he says, are obsessed with the idea of oppression, and, by waging war on oppressors real and imagined, they become oppressors themselves. Liberals, he says, are always talking about the importance of compassion—and yet “there’s nothing more horrible for children, and developing people, than an excess of compassion.” (This horror, he says, is embodied in the figure of the “Freudian devouring mother”; as an example, he cites Ursula, the sea witch from

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LIFETIME



"The Little Mermaid.") The danger, it seems, is that those who want to improve Western society may end up destroying it.

Peterson thinks that this danger has a lot to do with men and women, and the changing way we think about them. "The division of life into its twin sexes occurred before the evolution of multi-cellular animals," he writes, by way of arguing that human beings are bound to care about this division. During his Channel 4 News debate, Cathy Newman pressed him on whether he supported gender equality, and he replied that it depended on what the term meant. "If it means equality of outcome, then almost certainly it's undesirable," he said. "Men and women won't sort themselves into the same categories, if you leave them alone." (He mentioned that in Scandinavia, an unusually egalitarian part of the world, men are vastly overrepresented among engineers, and women among nurses.) Convictions such as these inspire in him a general skepticism of efforts to redress gender inequality. He has argued that traditionally feminine traits, such as agreeableness, are not historically correlated with professional success. (He says that, as a psychologist, he has often counselled female clients to be more assertive at work.) When Newman suggested that this correlation might merely reflect the ways women have been shut out of corporate leadership, Peterson sounded doubtful. "It *could* be the case that if companies modified their behavior, and became more feminine, that they would be successful," he said. "But there's no evidence for that."

Peterson is not primarily interested in policy, but he was eager to join the debate over C-16, the Canadian bill forbidding discrimination on the basis of gender identity or expression. In opposing the bill, Peterson claimed the mantle of free speech. "There's a difference," he explained, "between saying that there's something you can't say, and saying that there are things that you have to say." But if laws against discrimination also prohibit harassment, they will necessarily prohibit some forms of verbal harassment—and they will therefore, to a

greater or lesser extent, limit speech. Canada already limits speech in ways that the U.S. does not: a law against "hate speech" was repealed in 2013, but the government still bans "hate propaganda." From an American perspective, such laws may seem ill-advised, or even oppressive. Still, like many free-speech arguments, this one was in large part a debate over the political status of a minority group.

The C-16 debate is over, for now—the bill passed and was enacted last summer. But Peterson remains a figurehead for the movement to block or curtail transgender rights. When he lampoons "made-up pronouns," he sometimes seems to be lampooning the people who use them, encouraging his fans to view transgender or gender-nonbinary people as confused, or deluded. Once, after a lecture, he was approached on campus by a critic who wanted to know why he would not use nonbinary pronouns. "I don't believe that using your pronouns will do you any good, in the long run," he replied.

So what does Peterson actually believe about gender and pronouns? It can be hard to tell. Later in that campus conversation, when asked whether, in the absence of legal coercion, he would be willing to use pronouns such as "they" and "them" if a trans person asked him to, Peterson demurred. "It might depend on how they asked," he said. One of his foundational beliefs is that cultures evolve, which suggests that nonstandard pronouns could become standard. In a debate about gender on Canadian television, in 2016, he tried to find some middle ground. "If our society comes to some sort of consensus over the next while about how we'll solve the pronoun problem," he said, "and that becomes part of popular parlance, and it seems to solve the problem properly, without sacrificing the distinction between singular and plural, and without requiring me to memorize an impossible list of an indefinite number of pronouns, then I would be willing to reconsider my position."

Despite his fondness for moral absolutes, Peterson is something of a relativist; he is inclined to defer to a Western society that is changing in

unpredictable ways. In discussing the many women who have criticized him, he has talked about how verbal disagreements commonly contain an implicit threat of violence, and about how such implicit threats are "forbidden" when men are addressing women. And yet, even when the topic is as elemental as male-female violence, our norms are changing: in the United States, laws against spousal violence were first enacted in the middle of the nineteenth century; laws against spousal rape are only a few decades old. Not long ago, these laws might have seemed intrusive and disruptive; now, many people shudder at the notion that it might ever have been legal for a man to physically assault his wife. Peterson excels at explaining why we should be careful about social change, but not at helping us assess which changes we should favor; just about any modern human arrangement could be portrayed as a radical deviation from what came before. In the case of gender identity, Peterson's judgment is that "our society" has not yet agreed to adopt non-traditional pronouns, which isn't quite an argument that we shouldn't. And this judgment isn't likely to be persuasive to people in places—like some North American college campuses, perhaps—where the singular "they" has already come to seem like part of the social fabric.

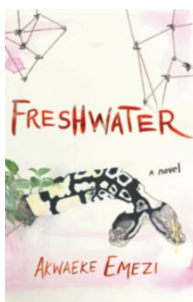
A different kind of culture warrior might express hostility to non-traditional pronouns in religious terms—in the United States, the fight against legal rights for L.G.B.T.Q. people has largely been led by believers. But Peterson—like his hero, Jung—has a complicated relationship to religious belief. He reveres the Bible for its stories, reasoning that any stories that we have been telling ourselves for so long must be, in some important sense, true. In a recent podcast interview, he mentioned that people sometimes ask him if he believes in God. "I don't respond well to that question," he said. "The answer to that question is forty hours long, and I can't condense it into a sentence." Forty hours, it turns out, is the approximate length of a lecture series

that he created based on “Maps of Meaning.”

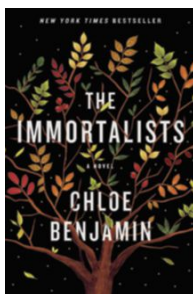
At times, Peterson emphasizes his interest in empirical knowledge and scientific research—although these tend to be the least convincing parts of “12 Rules for Life.” There is an extended analogy between human beings and lobsters, based on the observation that male lobsters that have proven themselves dominant produce more serotonin; he suggests that when people “slump around,” like weakling lobsters, they, too, will run short on serotonin, which will make them unhappy. The fact that serotonin has varied and sometimes contradictory effects scarcely matters here: Peterson’s story about the lobster is essentially a modern myth. He wants forlorn readers to imagine themselves as heroic lobsters; he wants an image of claws to appear in their mind whenever they feel themselves start to slump; he wants to help them.

Peterson wants to help everyone, in fact. In his least measured moments, he permits himself to dream of a world transformed. “Who knows,” he writes, “what existence might be like if we all decided to strive for the best?” His many years of study fostered in him a conviction that good and evil exist, and that we can discern them without recourse to any particular religious authority. This is a reassuring belief, especially in confusing times: “Each human being understands, a priori, perhaps not what is good, but certainly what is not.” No doubt there are therapists and life coaches all over the world dispensing some version of this formula, nudging their clients to pursue lives that better conform to their own moral intuitions. The problem is that, when it comes to the question of how to order our societies—when it comes, in other words, to politics—our intuitions have proved neither reliable nor coherent. The “highly functional infrastructure” he praises is the product of an unceasing argument over what is good, for all of us; over when to conform, and when to dissent. We can, most of us, sort ourselves out, or learn how to do it. That doesn’t mean we will ever agree on how to sort out everyone else. ♦

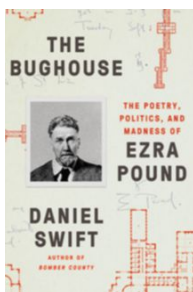
## BRIEFLY NOTED



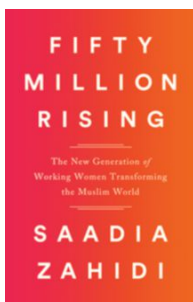
**Freshwater**, by Akwaeke Emezi (Grove). This ambitious novel is narrated mostly by spirits—a “godly parasite with many heads”—inhabiting the mind of the protagonist, Ada, a Nigerian who comes to America for college. After she is sexually assaulted, one of the spirits propels her through drug abuse, bad relationships, and suicide attempts. Later, when a more masculine spirit takes over, Ada starts wearing men’s clothes and undergoes surgery to achieve a “fine balance” of gender. Ada is torn between wanting to quell the spirits and feeling a certain security in submitting to them, until a historian explains the Igbo meaning of the name Ada and its links to the spirit world. The novel cunningly uses African traditions in order to show that they include ideas about gender, sexual orientation, and mental illness that are often presumed to be Western imports.



**The Immortalists**, by Chloe Benjamin (Putnam). Can we escape our fate? That question haunts the four Gold siblings in this novel, after a visit they make, as children, to a fortune-teller who predicts the day each of them will die. True or not, her pronouncements haunt the characters through their lives. One, told he’ll die young, runs away to San Francisco at sixteen. Another becomes a scientist obsessed with cheating death. The book spans decades, touching on the AIDS crisis, 9/11, race, and marriage. But, at its core, it’s an examination of free will and fate. “Was the woman as powerful as she seemed,” one of the children wonders, or did she herself “take steps that made the prophecy come true?”



**The Bughouse**, by Daniel Swift (Farrar, Straus & Giroux). In 1945, Ezra Pound, facing a treason trial for his wartime activities in Italy, was instead pronounced insane and held in a psychiatric hospital for twelve years. Swift examines the poet’s personal and artistic struggles during this time, and the influence he had on the fellow-writers who visited him. Swift asserts that “Pound in the insane asylum encapsulates the central questions about art, politics and poetry of the twentieth century.” That’s an extravagant claim, but the book abounds in striking details—Pound’s childlike hunger for gifts of apple candy, friends’ tender letters to and about him, and, especially, the hours poured into his unruly, unfinished “Cantos.”



**Fifty Million Rising**, by Saadia Zahidi (Nation). In the early years of this century, more than fifty million women joined the workforce across the Muslim world. Zahidi, the World Economic Forum’s head of Education, Gender, and Work, explores the origins and implications of this unprecedented “migration from home to work” in thirty countries. These countries’ records on gender equality vary widely, and, perhaps inevitably, Zahidi’s analysis is prone to generalization. Still, its scope is impressive. Drawing on economic data and interviews with female domestic workers, entrepreneurs, doctors, and C.E.O.s, Zahidi relates daunting and largely unheralded journeys.

## VILE BODY

*Coming out and taking off in Uzodinma Iweala's "Speak No Evil."*

BY LAURA MILLER



Uzodinma Iweala's first novel, "Beasts of No Nation," published in 2005, gave its readers imagined access to the experience of child soldiers in West Africa. As a way to get Westerners to enlarge their sympathy for people often perceived as distant, pitiable victims, the book succeeded completely, and was made into a film in 2015. Depending on what you think a novel should do, this accomplishment might seem more than sufficient. Like "Uncle Tom's Cabin," "Beasts of No Nation" is a work that uses sentiment—horror, compassion, the protective feelings children inspire—to instruct its

readers morally and prod them to action. You never have any doubt what you ought to feel about the long nightmare that the book's narrator, Agu, endures. Agu himself is not so much a character as an example or a composite, his life story carefully encompassing each of the various trials that Africa's child soldiers are known to suffer, from the loss of his parents to near-starvation, forced participation in atrocities, and sexual abuse. Agu is representative, rather than individualized. This, among other qualities, makes "Beasts of No Nation" didactic, but didacticism in novels is not nearly as despised as

some critics would have you think.

Iweala's second novel, "Speak No Evil," ventures into more ambiguous territory before veering back onto certain ground. Where Iweala researched "Beasts of No Nation" largely through reading up on child soldiers, "Speak No Evil" has a narrator, eighteen-year-old Niru, whose background more closely resembles Iweala's: he is the child of affluent Nigerians, and lives in a posh Washington, D.C., suburb. Niru's father drives a Range Rover, wears a Rolex, and likes to tell people that Ted Koppel is one of their neighbors. Niru goes to the sort of private school where the kids have a dress code and make big plans. A dutiful son, even if he feels permanently eclipsed by his older brother, he gets good grades, runs track, and attends church every Sunday. His is, at the novel's beginning, "an uncomplicated life with my Harvard early admission and two proud parents." By the end of the first chapter, however, he's rebuffed a pass from his best friend, Meredith, and confessed that he thinks he's gay.

Meredith, in an effort to be supportive, creates accounts for Niru on the hookup apps Tinder and Grindr, and even arranges an exploratory date for him. (A panicky Niru bails on "Ryan" and his promise of "coffee and then whatever.") One day he forgets to take his cell phone with him to school and his father finds it, the screen swarming with alerts from men interested in meeting his son.

"You want to go and do gay marriage, is that what you want, you want to go . . . put your thing for his *nyash*?" he rages. "Abomination. A BOMI NATION." A self-made man and a being Niru perceives as "all power, all will," he will not accept his son's sexuality any more than he surrendered to the many forces that attempted to destroy him during his boyhood in the midst of Nigeria's civil war. He orders Niru to return to Nigeria with him for "some serious spiritual counseling and deliverance."

The classic coming-out narrative describes how the central character makes a leap from one identity to another, into a different, freer life, while the classic immigrant novel depicts

*The soul of Iweala's novel is the tortuous relationship between father and son.*

what it's like to straddle two worlds, old and new, with a foothold in each. "Speak No Evil" is both and neither. Meredith invites Niru to elude the Nigeria trip by moving in with her family, but he can't bear the thought of the strange, un-Nigerian food he'd eat there or the "perpetual self-consciousness, of walking from an unfamiliar bedroom to an unfamiliar bathroom in the mornings." Nigeria itself he finds unpleasantly alien, a place of punishing humidity and reeking drains, yet his American classmates' ease in defying their parents is equally unfathomable. "Sometimes I stare at the family that owns me and I wish I were a different person, with white skin and the ability to tell my mother and my father, especially my father, to fuck off without consequences," he tells us.

The soul of "Speak No Evil" is the tortuous, exquisitely rendered relationship between Niru and his father, a man whose authority his son resents and admires. (Niru's mother, an altogether more supple and reasonable parent, tends to dissolve into the background.) In the way of all patriarchs, he is both magnificent—a "true village boy" made good, the survivor of a youth spent walking "ten miles to get sardines and tinned tomatoes for his family during the war, dodging low-flying Nigerian fighter planes that made a sport of strafing hungry refugees"—and ridiculous, a sufferer from what Niru's older brother calls "Nigeriatoma, an acute swelling of ego and pride that affects diaspora Nigerian men." The two, father and son, resemble each other in ways they barely notice, from their self-discipline to their craving for a fortified domesticity. What Niru cherishes about his life in Washington, what feels like home to him, isn't his school or his friends or the brash liberation of American culture but "our own house full of our things, pictures of us as a family." His father believes that "the safest place for a man to be, especially in America, is inside his own house."

Iweala could have portrayed Niru's father as a monstrous, intolerant figure; he *is* intolerant, and of more than homosexuality. He rails against, among

other things, the concept of hanging out ("What are you 'hanging' from, my friend"). But even when Meredith gives Niru's family cause to hate her and cast her from their doorstep, he comes outside to ask if her parents know where she is, and to call a taxi for her. Niru's father is constant in a world that's in flux, his belief in the primal importance of filial obligation a North Star. For Niru, his father, set off against the formlessness of American customs, seems more real than anything or anyone else. His classmates' unfettered lives and preoccupied parents feel shallow and insubstantial by comparison.

The unsolvable equation of Niru's destiny acquires an added complication when he haltingly begins a romance with an aspiring dancer. Their scenes together give Iweala the occasion for some of his most lushly emotional passages, with kisses that make Niru feel like "a star caught in the gravitational pull of a black hole, unraveling, spinning under the control of some unseen force, torn into streams of fire forever spiraling, never to be put together again." Here is an irresistible force capable of opposing the immovable object of his father, but even Niru's would-be lover can't persuade him to believe in a meaningful existence outside the older man's approval.

As in "Beasts of No Nation," Iweala's technique is uneven. Sometimes he borrows canned storytelling devices from TV and film. Niru learns, for example, of his mother's ongoing grief over a daughter who died in infancy when, as she emptied her purse to search for her keys one day, he glimpsed the tiny picture of the baby she kept there before she quickly snatched it away. His running becomes a belabored metaphor for an intermittent longing to escape. These clichés sit uneasily beside such literary affectations as the absence of quotation marks. But Iweala can also invoke the bland, vacant tranquillity of his upscale setting in a few potent lines, as when Niru slips out of a church service and sits "down on the steps that push their cold through my corduroy slacks and I pull my blazer

tighter around my chest. The street stretches into the distance in either direction, its silence occasionally interrupted by a jogger puffing heavily behind condensing breath." For a place deliberately designed to have no particular qualities, the novel's D.C. suburb feels palpably real.

"Beasts of No Nation" is hard to read in an easy way; the agonies and atrocities it recounts provoke simple responses. "Speak No Evil" is easier to read but harder to form reflexive judgments about. Every human being has to choose between the imperatives of individual desire and the sacrifices required to unite with others; furthermore, often it is the connections that make the greatest demands on us that end up being most fulfilling. What Niru's father wants from him—that he deny an essential part of himself—isn't fair or just, but neither were the brutalities the older man survived for the sake of his own parents. And in Niru's eyes it is these trials which give his father his stature, which make him a man.

Had Iweala kept the focus of "Speak No Evil" on Niru's impossible quandary, it would have been a better novel, if perhaps one destined to be less popular. Instead, in its final third, the book changes direction, lurching toward tragedy and topicality. This section of the novel is narrated by Meredith, in what appears to be a good-faith attempt to make her seem more like a person than like a device. She is not, unfortunately, a plausible character. What contemporary eighteen-year-old daughter of sophisticated privilege (with a pierced navel, no less) could spend so much time with a teen-age boy who shows no sexual interest in her and not quickly cotton on to the truth? Meredith's heedless actions once again precipitate a disastrous event, but in the second instance this is more *deus ex machina* than the organic product of what's come before. "I am always someone's accessory, someone's afterthought, the supporting actress in another person's drama," she broods. She's not wrong. There are only two characters who really matter in "Speak No Evil," and neither gets the ending he deserves. ♦



## LATELY

*Aesthetics and politics at the New Museum's Triennial.*

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

*Zhenya Machneva's "Project: Edition 1/1 Apollo and pigs."*

"Songs for Sabotage," the New Museum's 2018 Triennial, tethers fresh artists to stale palaver. The work of the twenty-six individuals and groups, mostly ranging in age from twenty-five to thirty-five, from nineteen countries, is formally conservative, for the most part: lots of painting, and craft mediums that include weaving and ceramics. The framing discourse is boilerplate radical. The show's catalogue and its verbose wall texts adduce abstract evils of "late capitalism" and (new to me) "late liberalism," which the artists are presumed to subvert. "Art is a part of the infrastructure in which we live and, if successful, might operate as propaganda," Alex Gartenfeld, the show's co-curator with Gary Carrion-Murayari, said at the press preview. (If art is propaganda, propaganda is art—and we live in Hell.) In principle, the show's aim reflects the New Museum's valuable policy of incubating upstart trends in contemporary art. But it comes off as willfully naïve. Nearly all the artists plainly hail from an international archipelago of art schools and hip scenes

and have embarked upon normal career paths. Noting that they share political discontents, as the young tend to do, is easy. Harder, in the context, is registering their originality as creators—like bumps under an ideological blanket. But there's insight to gain about emergent sensibilities in world art, without hustling everybody toward illusory barricades.

Handwork seems back in, for one striking thing, and innovation seems out. Small tapestries in cotton, linen, and synthetic threads, by the Russian Zhenya Machneva, depict obsolete factories, abandoned heroic statuary, and other remnants of lost Soviet grandeur. With lovely, soft textures and a palette given to muted blues and grays, are the works nostalgic, or are they sardonic? I can't decide. Machneva, born in 1988, bears watching. So does the Peruvian ceramist Daniela Ortiz, who incorporates plenty of verbal and symbolic agitation—for example, against the colonialist legacy of monuments to Christopher Columbus—into her satirical, terrific painted pots and figu-

rines, but with a charm that quite disarms militancy. Ortiz epitomizes a way in which artists can't help disappointing ideological allies, and may even qualify their own intentions, by wandering after their muses off-message. Her work ends up suggesting a protest mainly against disembodiment technology, rather as the late-Victorian Arts and Crafts movement reacted against industrial culture. It exalts less the urban revolutionary than the cottage artisan. This seems to me an authentic though ultimately futile response to the vaporous omnipresence and instantly disposable excitements of the Internet.

The show's two best artists, by my lights, are painters: the Kenyan Chemu Ng'ok, who is based in South Africa, and the Haitian Tomm El-Saieh, who lives in Miami. Each evinces an independent streak that is at odds with the vision of "collectivity" promulgated by the curators. Ng'ok does take on social content, celebrating a custom in which women braid one another's hair—an elaborate, at times painful, but intimately bonding activity—and referring to riotous student activism. But her feeling for her subjects only initiates the commotion of her style. Ng'ok has developed a confidently ebullient Expressionism of layered drawing—faces and figures teeming laterally and in depth—and of flowing brushwork, in deep-toned, plangent colors. She's not propagandizing; she's painting. Even more impressive is the abstractionist El-Saieh, who appears not political at all. He may owe his inclusion in the show to a dazzling olio of identities: the son of a Haitian and Palestinian father and an Israeli mother.

El-Saieh's three large acrylic paintings, including one that is eight feet high by twelve feet wide, suggest from a distance speckled veils of atmospheric color, predominantly gray and white, red and blue, or green and yellow. Up close, they reveal thousands of tiny marks, blotches, and erasures, each discretely energetic and decisive. The accumulation mesmerizes. Grasping for its coherence is like trying to breathe under water—which, to your pleasant surprise, as in a dream, you find that you can almost do. In the catalogue, the critic Rob Goyanes writes that El-

Saieh has derived inspiration from Haitian traditions of vodou trance-induction and percussive music. That sounds right. Less persuasive is Goyanes's view that the works "evoke the ghostly symbolic order of late capitalism"—if that even means anything. But something about the present world has proved congenial to this artist's startling revitalization of abstract painting. There will be more to see and to know of El-Saieh in the near future. He's a comer.

One artist in the show might appear to endorse the curators' fondness for propaganda, but Claudia Martínez Garay, a Peruvian based in Amsterdam, pretty much drowns it in irony. For her jazzy pair of mural-size reliefs, "Cannon Fodder/Cheering Crowds" (2018), she mounted, on one wall, cut-out paintings on wood of historical activist imagery, most of it obscure to me but including the Black Panther (from the movement, not the movie). The opposite wall holds a jumble of overlapping, elegant geometric abstractions, also on wood. A wall text explains that the latter repeat the shapes in a collage that Martínez Garay made of news clippings about the Shining Path, the Maoist insurgency in Peru that began in 1980 and has declined since splintering in 1992. The point alleged is that the artist critiques modernist abstraction as having been propaganda for—I don't know, maybe middle capitalism. But the colorful, sheer fun of the work raises doubts. What I take away is that the promotion of revolution and the departure from figuration in art amount to alternative strategies of visual seduction, booby-trapping intellectual programs with gratuitous pleasures. Why do political partisans ever place faith in fine art, which has proved incorrigibly hedonistic for, to date, thousands of years?

Geographic diversity is the show's strong suit. Artists other than those I've mentioned are Algerian, Brazilian, English, German, Greek, Indian, Mexican, Norwegian, Philippine, South African, and Zimbabwean. There are six Americans. But an unmistakable cast of sameness reigns. It's the archipelago: a global collectivity, indeed, but not so much one of partisan solidarity as one of shared information. Artists

anywhere today will be conscious of what's being done everywhere else, with discernible consequences for the directions they choose to take and those they reject. Internationalism is no utopian idea now but a workaday given. A nice-sounding correlative is that provincialism is dead, along with the formerly leading roles of metropolitan centers. But physics gives us a word for evenly distributed energies: "entropy." The "Sabotage" organizers imagine a global convergence of leftist rebels. I see local traditions dissolving in a soup of fungible sophistication, administered by functionaries who include frequently flying curators. The truest political dynamisms today involve people who, among their other defining conditions, neither attend nor have kids in art schools: a populist resentment of élites and a craving for hard-knuckled authority.

Art can be only art, though it may afford promontories on anything in the world. One such vantage point, to which I returned when revisiting the show, was that of Wong Ping, a droll and melancholy digital animator from Hong Kong. In a primitive visual style and with chipperly voiced, subtitled narration, he spins fables of men brought low by their vanities. A catalogue essayist, Yung Ma, asserts that Ping reflects "the increasingly strained relationship between Hong Kong and mainland China" and "the ongoing struggle to overturn misogynistic hegemonic culture." Be those things as they may—hard to judge on such indirect evidence—Ping manages both to sicken and to enchant with scabrous images and hypersensitive moral dither. In one story, a tree on a bus fails a test of conscience involving a pregnant elephant and a cockroach. (It's complicated.) The moral strikes me as the most apt—and truly sabotaging—message in this Triennial: "To all righteous thinkers, perhaps it is worthwhile to spend more time considering how meaningless and powerless you are." Well, and then maybe snap out of it! But there seems scant reason to trust the counsel of anyone who has not had and, yes, spent time considering that feeling—it's certainly common enough to touch, if not to unify, most of the inhabitants of our unquiet planet. ♦

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## LIFE STUDIES

*U.S. Girls' collection of characters.*

BY HUA HSU



I bought the first U.S. Girls seven-inch, “Kankakee Memories,” in 2009, for reasons that no music-discovery algorithm would likely predict. I didn’t know what U.S. Girls sounded like, or if it was indeed a band of American women. But the single’s title reminded me of my mother, who likes to reminisce about a summer in the early nineteen-seventies that she spent working at a diner in the small town of Kankakee, Illinois, just after she arrived in the United States. I eventually found out that U.S. Girls was one person, Meghan Remy, who grew up in Chicago but now lives in Toronto. Her songs were short and hazy, full of bright

melodies washed out with abrasive noise. Listening to them was like listening to oldies while tilling gravel.

In the next few years, Remy released music on a number of labels, casting her vocals against different, comparatively cleaner backdrops, from guitars, distortion, and feedback to samples and dusty loops. She cycled through genres purposefully, one by one. Remy herself seemed to disappear into her songs, which felt like costumes or disguises, as she ranged from scabrous noise to sixties girl-group glee, shimmery country-and-Western, and wobbly covers of nineties R. & B. Regardless of the background sounds,

her vocals were resilient, and she seemed to sing not to conquer but to haunt, or, perhaps, to bear witness.

As her music became less chaotic, however, it also became more experimental. In 2015, Remy released the full-length album “Half Free,” which tilted toward a more disco-influenced sound. Its songs were written from the perspectives of various women, often imaginary, many of whom were trying to see past the horizons they had been conditioned to accept. A verse about a Taiwanese immigrant, picking up slang while she waitressed in Kankakee, wouldn’t have felt out of place. Some of Remy’s characters were in love, others fearful of their lovers. On one song, the narrator has been widowed by war: “Damn that valley/Where is my man?” On another, she is fantasizing about an escape from her scheming husband, who, she just discovered, seduced her three sisters before he “settled on” her. Despite the album’s polished grooves, the shifting story lines gave it a gauzy, dreamlike quality.

“In a Poem Unlimited,” released in mid-February, is Remy’s sixth album, and her first with the Cosmic Range, a Toronto-based band that includes her chief collaborator (and husband), the singer and songwriter Slim Twig. There’s a warped sensibility that runs through the album, as if it were made up of radio dispatches from alternative time lines, in which the tropes of the typical female protagonist have been upended: the tragic heroine of the torch song remembers that she “can get that power, too,” and spends a night stalking the men who once terrorized her; the strutting disco diva imagines transcendence not in the bedroom or on the dance floor but through political rebellion. On “Pearly Gates,” St. Peter is anything but virtuous, and he demands sex for passage to Heaven: “Peter bragged he was good at pulling out.”

Remy almost never sounds angry, except in the occasional snarl. Yet there’s a steely intensity to her songs, as she bides her time, waiting for the right moment to strike. “Velvet 4 Sale” is the tightly wound revenge plot of someone “sleeping with one eye open.” Remy sings softly, dreaming of a pistol’s recoil

*Meghan Remy draws from the lives of others, making a shell game of identity.*

over flickering, ethereal guitars: “Don’t offer no reason/Instill in them the fear that comes from being prey.” At first, “M.A.H.” sounds like a cheerful disco gallop, Remy’s vocals aspiring toward a reedy, Madonna-like high. “We watched your hair go gray, that stressful manly shade,” she sings of an “eight-year ride,” and the song’s frustration, with Presidential charm, drones, and empty promises, comes into focus. “As if you couldn’t tell, I’m mad as hell,” she sings. “I won’t forget, so why should I forgive?”

One of my favorite songs on “Half Free” is “Window Shades,” in which Remy sings from the vantage of someone confronting a cheating lover. She refuses to play the “fool,” even if that path is easier. The video evokes thirties Hollywood, and the song features Remy singing over a loop from Gloria Ann Taylor’s “Love Is a Hurtin’ Thing,” from 1973, a haunting bit of lo-fi disco that should have been a hit. “Window Shades” is a strange convergence of past and present, and there’s a feeling of intimacy and communion, if you know the mournful original, when Remy’s voice veers upward, away from Taylor’s desperation. Even though there are moments on “In a Poem Unlimited” that call to mind disco, synth-pop, and post-punk, the album never seems nostalgic, or like an attempt to conjure a more harmonious past. Instead, it feels as though she’s straying from the script she’s been given, revisiting crossroads, political and personal, where different choices could have been made.

An undue burden of autobiography is often projected onto artists working in the margins, the presumption being that art by women, or by people of color, is meaningful only insofar as it looks inward, reflecting on their own marginality. U.S. Girls calls to mind the work of the visual artists Cindy Sherman and Carrie Mae Weems, who frequently explore the parameters of gender, from what is proscribed to what is embodied. But Remy also aspires to the freedom, and the presumption of universality, granted to musicians like Bob Dylan, Lou Reed, and—one of Remy’s heroes—Bruce Springsteen, who draw from the stories of those around them, making a shell game of identity. Where they might have plumbed an old, weird American past to understand their present, though, Remy’s music looks forward. What’s powerful about “In a Poem Unlimited” isn’t its insight into Remy’s own psyche, or the moment, in a given story, when a bad man faces comeuppance. It’s the possibility that something links these lives, a consciousness greater than what their author imagined.

“We all know what’s right/We didn’t get it from a book or a site,” she sings on the track “Poem.” “No one needs to get paid/If we all agree we don’t have to live that way.” Maybe modern life, too, has become a bad relationship; perhaps we are mired in too deep a funk to imagine anything else. Of course, in real life there’s no such thing as consensus, and that sentiment is at odds with the realities elsewhere on her album. “To be brutalized means you don’t have to think/And life is easy when there is

only pain to compete,” an abused lover sings on “Incidental Boogie.”

While these are songs that dream of protest and anger, revenge and redemption, they begin with small acts of self-determination—moments when characters sit up straight, find their voices, and reclaim their self-esteem. And then there are moments of darkness, which no poetry can make beautiful, or even tolerable. I was admiring the sleazy blues of “Rage of Plastics” in a cab, on the way to the airport, when I caught a line about “the silent spring”—a reference to Rachel Carson’s work about the chemical industry and its effects on the environment. The song, written by the Toronto singer Simone Schmidt, is about a woman who loses her twenties to “this refinery job and his maybes.” Life “downwind of the plant” has ravaged her body, and the song ends in despair: “Making this living just brings about dying.”

As I discerned these lines, I looked up, for a moment, and noticed the dull, gray sky; the people on their way to work; the driver’s bald spot. How many modern amenities extinguish our curiosity about one another’s paths, especially if they don’t fit into a single, unified narrative? Art is an excuse to imagine the lives of others—to begin reckoning with those around us, and the stories we might tell together. It sounds trite, yet it’s this possibility of humility, of the singer onstage being no more than a vessel for everyone down below, that draws me to Remy’s music: a collection of individual voices that sing side by side, rarely finding harmony, but trying anyway. ♦

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VOLUME XCIV, NO. 3, March 5, 2018. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for five combined issues: February 12 & 19, July 9 & 16, August 6 & 13, November 26 & December 3, and December 24 & 31) by Condé Nast, which is a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Chris Mitchell, chief business officer; Risa Aronson, vice-president, revenue; James Guilfoyle, executive director of finance and business operations; Fabio Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast: Robert A. Sauerberg, Jr., president & chief executive officer; David E. Geithner, chief financial officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, chief revenue and marketing officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

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## CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

*Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Benjamin Schwartz, must be received by Sunday, March 4th. The finalists in the February 12th & 19th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the March 19th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit [contest.newyorker.com](http://contest.newyorker.com).*

### THIS WEEK'S CONTEST



“

”

### THE FINALISTS



*“Well, if you want a record of your existence,  
it's either this or the tar pits.”*

Matthew Anderson, Dallastown, Pa.

*“Primitive? Compared to what?”*  
Mort Guiney, Granville, Ohio

*“Don't worry, the cave always adds ten pounds.”*  
Austin Moorhead, Nashville, Tenn.

### THE WINNING CAPTION



*“Have you tried icing it?”*  
Xiwen Wang, Williamstown, Mass.



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